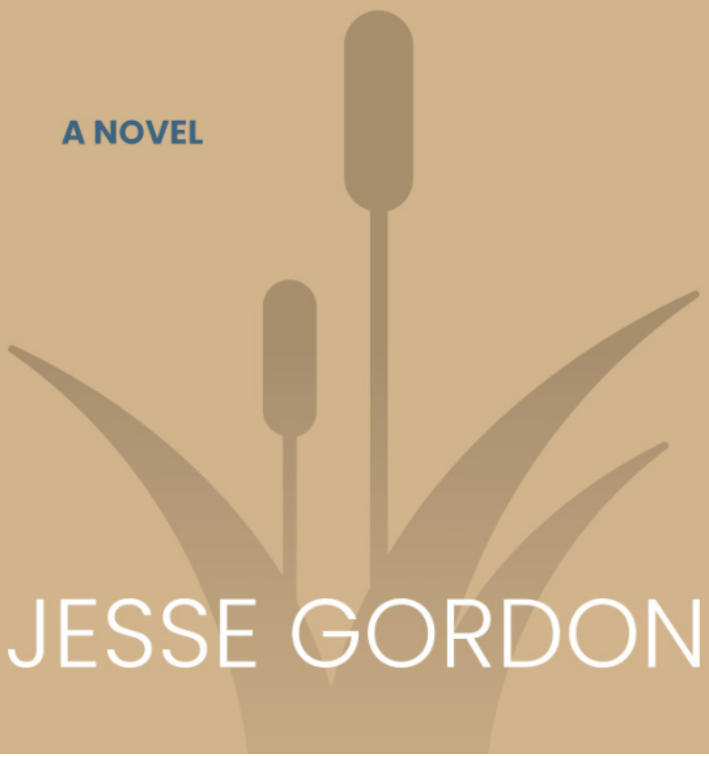
STORIES FROM THE

# STEEL GARDEN

A NOVEL



JESSE GORDON

# stories from the steel garden

jesse gordon

CREAM-COLORED COFFEE CUP

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For Abbey

# Chapter 1

On a Friday morning, a month before the great revolt, Richard Doroschenko was awakened by a soft tap on the window. He was instantly alert, out of his bed, and across the small bedroom he shared with Gramma and Grampa, both of whom remained asleep. He pulled the curtain aside and saw Juju, one of the male residents, standing in the bushes and clutching a small bundle. He was in his underwear.

Richard cracked the window open, stuck his head outside. "Juju? What's going on?"

"Quick!" Juju whispered, beckoning. "They'll be here soon! We should hustle!"

Perplexed, Richard nodded, started to reach for his coveralls—

"Leave them," Juju hissed. He'd stuck his head in the window. "No doggie tag either. Just you. Now, *come on!*"

Richard glanced momentarily at his grandparents. Then he tiptoed back to the window and crawled outside.

Juju nodded approvingly, started away from the worker dormitories and toward the gated perimeter of the Steel Garden campus.

"Rats, Juju," Richard said after several minutes of silence. "You're looking for trouble again, aren't you?"

"Indeed I am."

Richard sighed. Juju was new to Steel Garden, and, as such, was one of the more ornery residents. A transplanted thirty-something of African stock, he seemed to have a hard time coping with a good many aspects of his life. He was always ranting and raving and philosophizing about grand things, things that were as out of reach as the stars. The men of Steel Garden found Juju annoying, the women found him distantly amusing, the younger children mocked him in limerick and song.

"I'm making a run for it," Juju said once they'd reached the campus perimeter and taken up post behind a gathering of creosotes. Every so often a patrol bot whizzed by, but none of them oriented on Juju or Richard. "I figured it out, see? They only allow us the coveralls because they know it's demeaning, because it's cheaper that way—and because they know it keeps tracking simpler. The bots' cameras are only activated when they detect a person's tags—the cheap bastards!"

"You mean the RFID tags?" asked Richard.

"Yes, the RFID tags. Each one is finer than a grain of sand and woven right into the fabric of our—wait, you know about them already?"

Richard shrugged. "Of course. Everyone knows. You've only found out about

them now?"

Juju's expression turned awestruck. "So...everyone knows, and not one of you could have let me in on the secret?"

"You never asked."

"God almighty, I'm surrounded by imbeciles!" Juju ruffled his own hair. "If this sort of thing is common knowledge, then why the hell haven't any of you taken for the hills?"

"There aren't any hills around here, Juju."

"You know bloody well what I mean!"

Richard sighed. "You do this every month, and they catch you every time."

"This time's different."

"Yeah," said Richard. "This time you'll be in your underwear when they haul your butt back on campus."

Juju glared at him. "Look, kiddo. I didn't bring you here to burst my bubble. If I wanted that I'd still be in bed, counting the minutes until the work bell. I talk to you because you're the only person in this godforsaken hole who truly has the ability to *listen*. Others hear, but you actually record the words and ideas in your head in a somewhat coherent fashion. We all know you're the storyteller—so, I've got a story for you. Get the facts straight and maybe it'll inspire your grunt friends to stand up for themselves."

Richard gripped the chainlink and squinted into the burgeoning dawn. "So, the bots can't track you. You'll have a couple hours' head start before Parsons realizes you haven't shown up for work. Still, there's nothing out there but flatland. Tumbleweeds, dust, and sand."

"There's a lot more out there than there is in here, if you make it far enough. Money, clothes, food—a decent Rob Roy, for Christ's sake. You forget: I wasn't born in-house. The outside world isn't just something I hear about from friends."

"What about when the sun comes up?" Even now, with dawn merely a hint of color welling behind the eastern horizon, it was more than warm enough to be strutting around nearly naked as such. By noon it would be in the 100s. There was shade on campus, but out in the wild, and with no clothes...

"I've been saving the ol' zinc oxide," Juju said. "And besides, a fellow like me"—he shrugged his broad shoulders—"can take a little sun if it means I'll have a chance at rocking the boat."

"But where are you going to *go*?"

"Pacifica—or one of the coastal villages. There's actually a sea breeze once you get over the levee range."

"You're a grunt. You'll get busted. They'll know you're not one of them—*if* you even make it out of the desert." Richard bit his lip, trying to choose the best method of placating his friend. His heart sank when he realized all the reasons had to do with his own preferences, and not Juju's. Out of desperation, he said, "Why don't you just *stay*? Mrs. Foster's making her famous lemonade tonight for the Union address."

"Unbelievable," Juju muttered. "You're the perfect citizen, you know that?

Born and bred right here in the belly of the beast. You've got no experience. How can I explain to you the concept of freedom? The taste of a smooth merlot? The love of a good woman?"

"I work for freedom," Richard said, the old pledges he'd learned as a child suddenly piping up in his mind. "We all do. Earth is a member of the Sol Union. The Kiengiri have agreed to offer us protection as long as we provide whatever aid is necessary for them to treat their soldiers and maintain their ships. It's war, Juju. Galactic war. They need workers, not guys running around the outback looking for booze and babes. If we all did that, the Kur would have put us in a zoo or blown us to pieces decades ago."

Juju spat. "You've seen your share of videos. Explain to me why it's okay for those high-class media stars to parade around in front of a camera by day, to fill up on Hollywood glitz and glamor by night, to drive their fancy cars and live in their giant estates with private swimming pools the size of our dormitory—and yet here we are, slapping shuttle parts together, day in and day out. The one-percent get off easy because the remaining ninety-nine percent are doing all the work for the Union. Where's the freedom in *that*?"

"I have my home," Richard said. "My family's here. So's yours."

"This isn't *family*. It's famine. Oppression. I was in jail once, did you know that?"

Richard shook his head.

"Oh, yes. Back before this whole Sol Union fiasco came to fruition. I got drunk, went joyriding in a stolen car and trashed up some private property. Didn't kill anyone, but I was set up for a nice little stay behind bars. At least there they told you to your face you were a prisoner. It wasn't pretty, but you knew the score, eye to eye. Here...here you've got the poor and the stupid—anyone who's not a family member of a big corporation or the government—providing cheap labor for how long now? Twenty years? And all this time under the guise of *community housing*. Steel *Garden* my sweet tochus. The campus system is nothing more than a chain of slave labor camps."

Richard couldn't think of anything to say, so he merely continued to listen—to Juju, and to the steadily-growing low hum emanating from the west.

"What do you have to look forward to when you get old, when you're tired and wrinkled and Klug, that turd of a foreman, retires you like an old shuttle? You want to be like your grandparents, with no rations, totally dependent on 'community support?' You better hope by the time you turn old and gray there'll be someone there as benevolent as yourself, someone who's willing to take care of you as well as you take care of your grandma and grandpa."

Juju looked as if he wanted to go on talking forever, and very well might have if the bots hadn't caught his attention. Four of them shot out from the perimeter and converged upon a pair of medical vans (two per van) moving up the road toward the Steel Garden entrance. There were no people in sight.

"Okay, kiddo," Juju whispered, pressing himself to the ground and slinking snakelike through the sand. "Follow my lead. A sleepy campus guard will open the

gate to let the procession in. He'll need a minute to upload the bots' task information, but I want you to catch him before that. As soon as he opens the gate, I want you to jump out of the bushes and create a diversion."

Richard, amazed at how horizontal Juju was able to make himself, tried to follow suit, and only half succeeded. "What kind of diversion?"

"Anything will do."

"But he's got a gun," Richard hissed, craning his neck to see the guard's booth.

"He won't shoot you."

"But what if—"

"Goddamnit, he *won't* shoot you. You're just a kid, for Christ's sake!"

Richard stopped beside Juju; they were now adjacent to the main road. "I'm almost twenty-one."

"Close enough. Now, are you going to help me or not?"

Richard sighed. He'd already come this far; there was no point in turning back now. Shifting into a crouch, ready to spring into action, he said, "I guess, but I don't know you if you get caught."

The gate rattled and started sliding open.

"Deal—now *go!*" Juju ordered, and shoved Richard forward, almost knocking him onto his face. He recovered quickly enough, though, and stumbled out into the open, where the procession came to a grinding halt. The guard, having just stepped out of his booth, blinked twice and regarded Richard with an expression of bewilderment. There was an utterly awkward moment of silence before Richard forced himself to start talking.

"You're new here, right?" He called up a memory of the man's face in his mind, cross-referenced it with a story one of the Peeping Hags had told him. "Got in the week before last?"

The guard frowned, cleared his throat and started forward. "The day shift doesn't start until eight. What are you—"

"*Listen*. This is important." Richard stepped forward as well; when he was close enough, he put his hand on the guard's shoulder, persuading him to lean in close. Then, emulating Juju: "They've got electronic tags in the clothes, see? Did you know that?"

The guard blinked—Richard couldn't tell if it was because he didn't know about the tags or if it was merely the audacity of the situation he'd been unceremoniously thrust into. "Buddy, you shouldn't be here—"

"Do you know what RFID is?"

"Where's your tag? Where are your *clothes?*"

"I don't mean to be ill-mannered—I'm only bringing this up because I hate it when the big boys cross the line, but...have you ever been with a woman named Lips?"

The guard started, and a royal blush consumed his face as he looked to and fro, over his shoulder. "Hey, what is this? Some kind of prank? How did you know—"

Richard held his finger to his lips, signaling silence. He tapped the front of the guard's uniform and whispered, "*Radio...frequency...identification*. Miniature

computer chips. Each one is finer than a grain of sand and woven right into the fabric of our clothes!" Glancing over his shoulder, then back again: "That turd Klug likes to keep his finger on the pulse. We're assets to him, see? He's got us on his little screen. He knows how many of us there are, where we are at all times, and all from the comfort of his watch room. It's a twenty-four hour a day thing. But honestly, I ask you, is it so necessary to monitor us during our rec hours? When we're watching the video feeds? When we eat? When we sleep?"

"Well, I'm sure for security purposes—"

"Is it so darned necessary to monitor what you and Lips do in the privacy of your bedroom?"

"You're messing with me—"

"My advice," said Richard, "is to keep your eyes and ears open at all times. You never know who's peeking."

With that, Richard turned and started to stroll casually away, whistling a tune as he went and hoping he'd performed above and beyond Juju's expectations.

"Hey—stop right there," the guard called, running after him.

Richard felt his gut clench as the guard grabbed his shoulder, turned him so that they were face to face again. Surely the game was up, surely he was going to get it—

"Are you serious?" the guard asked.

Richard blinked. He glanced toward the entrance. Juju was nowhere to be seen; if he'd escaped, he'd done so with impeccable stealth...and if not, well, Richard couldn't say he was totally averse to hearing his cop-out story during lunch break. Juju would certainly be amused by Richard's experience with the Newbie Watchman.

He cleared his throat. "Sure, I'm serious. I mean, why else would I go for a pee break in my undies? I don't want anyone watching—I can't go under pressure, can you?"

The guard's face oscillated between a variety of distasteful expressions. With one last nervous look over his shoulder, he stepped back and said, "All right then. You just...just get on back home before I call security."

Amazed he wasn't being handcuffed, Richard nodded and left the road. As soon as he was out of sight, he stuck his fist into his mouth and giggled fiendishly. Truth to tell, it hadn't been Klug's surveillance that had turned up Newbie's carnal folly but that of the Peeping Hags, who'd employed a young boy named Squirt in lieu of proper tags and hidden cameras. If only the guard had known!

With the predawn shadows dying slow and painful deaths, Richard bounded between the creosotes and felt the promise of another scorching hot afternoon with each drop of sweat that escaped his pores—yet he could hardly wait for the sun to rise and the day to begin so he could get to work and tell the others the story of Juju's daring early morning escape.

# Chapter 2

Richard returned home just as Gramma was getting up to close the bedroom window.

"Watching the medical bots with Juju, were you?" she asked as he slid noiselessly inside.

"Juju's gone," he replied, stifling his surprise at her having noticed his absence. He'd assumed she'd been asleep, unaware.

"Gone?" asked Gramma. "What do you mean?"

"He left. Through the gate, when it was open."

Gramma rolled her eyes, put her hand to her forehead. "Oh, my lord. What on Earth does he hope to accomplish this time? He's going to get himself killed, torn to pieces by coyotes. He's going to get us all in trouble again. Why didn't you stop him?"

Richard shrugged. "You know Juju. Once he gets worked up over something, that's it."

With a disapproving snort, Gramma turned away, fumbled in the darkness for her coveralls.

"Did I wake you and Grampa?" Richard asked, grabbing his dog tag and getting dressed as well.

"You know he doesn't wake up for anything less than an air attack," Gramma said, glancing at her bed, where Grampa snored fitfully. "I, of course, am the complete opposite. I was watching you sleep, remembering the days when *I* could just come home from work and plop down like that. But I suppose now that we're both up we can have breakfast together—"

"And I can tell you my story."

Gramma zipped up her coverall and, after taking a moment to catch her breath, started toward the bedroom door. "Breakfast first."

Richard sighed, reeled in his excitement as he followed Gramma out into the living room, which was the ideal example of modesty. All of the Garden's dormitories were of similarly efficient dimensions, and were comprised of two major compartments: bedroom and living space. No internal plumbing meant no bathroom, no kitchen, though Richard had helped Gramma set a small cutting board and eating table beside the curtained window.

He sat with her at the table, and they shared fruit from the icebox, some water from the keg. Through the window Richard could see the bots quietly monitoring the medical setup in the plaza, and he was glad he'd showered before going to bed last night. It was going to be another torrid day; even now he was perspiring lightly

under his clothes. In a few short hours the plaza would be mobbed, filled with doctors and nurses and Steel Garden workers waiting to get their monthly physical examinations.

It was going to be *hot*.

As was her custom, Gramma kept quiet for the first half of breakfast and only spoke to say grace and to routinely remind Richard not to eat with his mouth open. She was, as Juju lovingly liked to put it, a "proud bitch," someone who struggled to maintain an air of respect and dignity despite her age and environment. Garden workers were retired at sixty-five, oftentimes earlier if there was an incidence of chronic injury; in the two years since Gramma's being retired, she'd (understandably) honed her pride as a means of survival. The Doroschenkos' rations had been cut twice now, once when Grampa had been deemed mentally unfit for work, and again when Gramma had turned sixty-five—she was a community burden, and she was painfully aware of it, though Richard often reminded her that he didn't mind taking care of her and Grampa one bit.

"They say there's a new extraterrestrial bug going around," Gramma said after a while. "Supposed to be real nasty. The Ferrera sisters have heard that the doctors are bringing a vaccine today."

Richard grunted. "The docs are always finding excuses to poke us with needles."

"Better them than the Kur."

"I guess." It was still uncomfortable.

Gramma cleared the table, fetched one of the sandwiches she'd made last night from the icebox. She handed it to Richard—his lunch. "You know, not one of us has gotten sick since coming here. Not that I'm praising the campus system or anything, but it's not like this in the big cities. I remember. Air so thick with smog you could go for days without seeing the sun. Apartments piled sky-high. Someone sneezes in the next room over and suddenly you've got the flu. People fighting like animals over who gets the next taxi ride."

"Animals don't fight over taxis," Richard said.

"You know what I mean."

Richard chuckled, fetched his lunchbox from the dish rack, and placed his sandwich inside. "Think you and Grampa will manage okay with your physicals? You can wait until I get off—we can go together, if it's too much trouble by yourselves."

Gramma looked flustered, the poise she'd carefully constructed during breakfast now unraveling fast. "If there's time, we'll go. If not...one month off won't hurt."

"But what about your meds? And Grampa's?"

"Silly little pills, that's all they are—"

"Gramma, it's important—"

"—and you know how your grandfather has trouble in big crowds, especially strangers. He gets upset. People stare."

Richard folded his arms and fixed Gramma with a stern look. "You're *going*."

Gramma sighed, made an exasperated noise that might have passed for a swear word in disguise as she went over to the window and gazed outside. Somewhere behind her tempered visage was a wall of tears just aching to burst forth—but she kept herself in check. "Richard, you must understand. Your grandfather and I aren't young anymore. We were on our way out when they first brought us here. The law says they can't outright *dispose* of us, but, well, they won't let us work, won't let us contribute, so we get less food, no medical—every month we have to cook up a new story to convince the doctors to slip us what we need under the table. We're only putting off the inevitable. And you...you've been an absolute angel to share your take, and I know you get what you need from that Foster lady... but you're a young man now, old enough to take care of yourself. You need to keep your strength up so you can work, help the Union. You don't need a pair of old fogies like us stealing from your icebox like common thieves."

A cacophony of emotions roared through Richard—he countered them all with a firm, well-practiced clench of his mind and muscle. "You've known Mrs. Foster ever since the beginning. Why do you still call her 'that Foster lady?'"

"All right, enough," Gramma said, no doubt countering her own inner qualms. She sat once again at the table and motioned for Richard to sit as well. "There's still time before the work bell. Tell me your story."

Richard smiled and took his seat, and though dawn had by now delivered sunlight into the plaza, into the Doroschenkos' living room, it was quickly banished as Richard began his tale. Gramma's eyes, once reflecting the golden-tinged minimalistic planes of the breakfast nook, now reflected chainlink and creosotes and two pitifully underdressed Garden grunts crouching conspiratorially between the security phosphors. There wasn't much time for elaboration, but Richard recounted the details of Juju's daring early morning escape with impeccable accuracy. Truthfully, the experience hadn't been all that dramatic, but he *made* it dramatic, made the small and insignificant into something meaningful. He was very visual, and he made good use of hand gestures and body language to illustrate certain plot points: When (in his narrative) he followed Juju along the Steel Garden perimeter, he crawled along the living room floor, even took a moment, at one point, to remove an imaginary insect from his backside. When he faced down Newbie, he turned away and whispered into the man's ear as if he were actually standing right here in the apartment.

"Juju was a man of the wild," Richard said, doing a little monkey dance and earning a genuine chuckle from Gramma. "He was a bird riding the wind—a free spirit shackled by a fate unceremoniously unloaded on all of mankind. He was a prime example of what we've lost as a race because of the war. No one seems to remember human individuality anymore, but Juju did. He knew because he was human, living a human life in a world that's no longer humane, there was nothing for him here, and so he left, charging through the gates with a swagger in his step and a sparkle in his eye."

The story ended; young man and woman were released back into the light, into the newborn day sure to be as monotonous as every other except for one small

detail: a drift of sand, snatched from out of thin air and scattered across the breakfast table.

Gramma reached out, brushed her fingers over the sparkling grains. “I don’t know how you do it, Richard. I really don’t.”

The work bell sounded. Richard took a bow, then fetched his boots from beside the door, slipped them on. He grabbed his lunchbox and was heading out the door when Gramma caught him by the shoulder.

“Richard,” she said.

He stopped, one foot out, one foot in. “Yeah?”

“Your grandfather and I will see the doctors.”

Richard smiled. “Good.”

# Chapter 3

The Steel Garden campus was a crisscrossing patchwork of sand and concrete, with the six dormitory buildings (A through F, respectively) spaced evenly around the domed hub of the central warehouse. Richard fell into step with a stream of other workers, male and female. All were dressed similarly in beige-colored coveralls and wielding early-morning grimaces as well as lunchboxes and knapsacks. On a normal morning, Richard might have struck up a hearty conversation with Juju, but as it was, he merely filed along with everyone else, silent and sullen.

In the locker room, as everyone was storing away their lunches and donning their hardhats, he was approached by Grabs (who was a few years older, and whose real name was Simon, but who'd earned the nickname "Grabs" due to his rather blunt way with the ladies).

"Where's Juju?" Grabs asked.

"Gone," replied Richard. "Skipped out this morning."

"Oh, *geez*."

"Want to hear the story?"

Grabs held up his hand, shook his head. "No, no. I heard a rumor that you and him were running around this morning and causing trouble—I want no part of it, just in case Parsons decides to grill everybody."

Disappointed, Richard slumped his shoulders and quietly followed Grabs out into the assembly room, where everyone lined up for roll call and the daily pep talk.

Klug, the warehouse foreman, was a distracted-looking man in his thirties who lived off-campus, and who did little else than sit in his office all day and shuffle papers around. This was evidenced by his slightly pudgy frame and ultra-soft hands —Richard knew because he'd shaken the man's hand once and it had been indistinguishable from a baby's bottom. Always behind schedule, he very rarely looked directly at you while he was speaking, and he very rarely spoke to you while he was busy trying to conquer whatever bureaucratic malady threatened to run Steel Garden into the ground.

After the obligatory pledge recital, Klug took up post at the head of the gathering.

"Okay," he said, clearing his throat and skimming over his clipboard through a pair of gigantic eyeglasses. "Just a few items of business..." His gaze darted to and fro, back and forth, from his clipboard to the amassed workers, counting, checking — "Does anyone know where Mr. Ngungu has gotten himself to this morning?"

Heads turned, shoulders shrugged; Richard looked squarely at the floor, perfectly willing to let the mystery go unsolved until time eventually revealed the

truth. Grabs, however, seemed to have other plans, and shoved Richard forward with enough force that he nearly flew right into Klug's arms.

It was the second time that morning he'd been unexpectedly thrust into an uncomfortable situation.

Klug regarded him with a bug-eyed expression. Awestruck and exasperated. "Hm. Mr. Doroschenko. I don't suppose you could enlighten us as to the whereabouts of our dearly departed Juju?"

Richard shook his head. "I'm afraid not, Mr. Klug."

"Because I certainly don't want a repeat of last month."

"No repeat, sir."

"Are you certain?"

Richard bit his lip, hoped he was sweating heat-sweat and not nervous-sweat. "Sir, with each passing second, your productivity slips down another notch."

Klug's expression became ashen, and he quickly hustled Richard back into line as, once again addressing the group as a whole, he reiterated the necessity of a five-percent increase in the plant's output. When he was done, he clapped his hands twice—his own little nonverbal expression of *Go!*—and disappeared into his office.

Laughter filled the room, and several of the men slapped Richard on the back.

"*Productivity!*" one of them boomed.

"Now *that* was rich, kid!" said another.

There was a brief moment of exchanged quips before everyone was off to their various stations, and the work day officially began. Because he hadn't yet been trained properly, Richard wasn't allowed to operate any of the more intricate machinery (though he was certain he could handle any piece of Garden equipment without issue), and so was made to do more of the basic grunt work, packing this, unpacking that, loading and unloading and jogging back and forth between stations at the whim of anyone who needed something extraneous taken care of. All the while, the older workers got to actually *drive* the lifts, *maneuver* the cranes, *assemble* the various shuttle components, and so forth. Not that they were doing anything of great intricacy anyway; all the parts were manufactured to Kiengiri specs, and Richard's coworkers merely followed the downloaded guidelines with their visors and assembly gauntlets—but still, even though the manual labor didn't bother Richard as much as the monotony, he frequently had to stave off the boredom by telling himself soon, soon enough he would be trained and promoted and allowed to play with the big boys' toys.

As Juju would have put it, he thought, woeful.

* * *

At ten after five:

Richard wiped a bead of sweat from his forehead, hefted his clothing bundle in his arms. The late afternoon sun broiled mercilessly in the sky; he wondered if the zinc oxide cream was doing him any good. Behind him, Gramma was helping Grampa out of his clothes and was talking to him in slow, steady tones, trying to

help him adjust to a nearly out-of-control situation that had arisen from a computer mishap. Nearly a hundred residents' medical files had been corrupted in a computer crash, and so many of those living in building A had to be re-evaluated all over again.

Needless to say, Richard was exasperated. Most Friday evenings weren't like this. Most Fridays Steel Garden's residents could do whatever they wanted during off-time—and even if it was one of those weird days when the power went out or the water system stalled...most Fridays Richard had someone to talk to.

Nine hours. Somehow Juju had gone nine hours and not been recaptured—and Richard had gone that long without a single meaningful conversation.

It was madness.

"Next."

Snapping out of his reverie, Richard realized he was up. He stepped forward, and a tired-looking nurse in white took hold of his dog tag, scanned it with her reader.

"Richard, is it?" the nurse said, feigning a smile.

"It sure is," replied Richard, nodding, hoping for the nurse's name in return—

"Right here, Richard." The nurse motioned for him to step onto a weight scale that had been placed beside the examination table.

Richard complied, setting his things down on the ground and stepping onto the scale. "Is it true there's a new bug going around?"

"Well," said the nurse, "these things, er...these things come and go... Over here, please." She gestured at the height rod. "Yeah...there's always something new going around... On the table, please."

Richard complied, asking again about pathogens, and then trying (unsuccessfully) to strike up a decent give and take. However, he soon discovered that the nurse didn't talk to him so much as she mumbled various strings of semi-relevant words. She paid more attention to her collection of utensils for poking and prodding, lifting and looking; when she gave him his shot, she stared past his shoulder, as if looking for someone in the crowd (she might have been a female Klug!). When she was through, she hustled him off to one side, handed him his clothes and a printout of his medical results. Before he could say goodbye, she'd turned away and was assisting the next person in line.

As much as he wanted to have a shower, wash his clothes, Richard knew such amenities would be out of the question until later in the evening, after the medical staff cleared out. He pulled on his coveralls and boots; then, standing at the periphery of the plaza, he looked over his printout, only recognizing half of the words (Gramma could read him the rest later, though he was sure it contained the usual random, meaningless statistics regarding his height, weight, body fat, mineral levels, and so forth).

He looked up, spotted his grandparents sitting together on the examination table. Gramma had a look of utter embarrassment on her face; Grampa merely stared straight ahead, and could have been watching a newsfeed for all intents and purpose. He did show signs of awareness when Gramma got into her usual

argument with the doctor. Richard couldn't make out the exact words over the ambient noise, but after several minutes of haggling, he saw her looking his way, and he knew it was time for an intervention. He started across the plaza, the noises of the crowd growing louder, suddenly urgent—someone was yelling from the direction of the south entrance.

"You heard me, you lugs! Hands off!"

In unison, a hundred or so heads turned toward the entrance as a path was cleared into the center of the plaza. Two gruff-looking soldiers were leading a handcuffed African man to the front of the line—

—Juju. He was covered from head to toe in dust and debris, but looking none the worse for wear.

"They insisted I make my physical on time," he chuckled when he passed close to Richard, who nearly whooped for joy. "How kind of them, eh?" Then, leaning in close, he whispered into Richard's ear: "Have I got a story for you, kiddo."

# Chapter 4

If the plaza had been on the verge of disorder before Juju's arrival, it was now very nearly a full-fledged riot scene as building A's residents waved their arms in the air, cheered, whooped, and whistled in celebration of their man-on-the-run's return to the fold. Guards who had been inconspicuously placed throughout now stepped forward, demanded order through their megaphones, lest they start making arrests.

Richard's neighbors were a rambunctious bunch, but not necessarily out for mayhem. Besides, it was hot—if everyone got into trouble, they would be spending needless days squeezed together in a stuffy jail cell. They poked their fun at the authority figures, but eventually reverted to their previous semi-chaotic state of wait.

All but Juju, that is. He continuously released a steady stream of exclamations concerning community policy and human rights as he was led to the front of one of the lines.

Richard followed, caught up with the guards.

One of them was addressing the doctor: "The security chief would like an immediate physical examination for resident 82."

"Hear that, everyone?" Juju shouted, half-heartedly struggling against his bonds. "*Resident 82*—I've been reduced to a number!"

The crowd booed.

"Pipe down, Juju," said the other guard, smiling.

In response, Juju flicked him off and, at the doctor's request, opened his mouth, squeezed his fist, turned his head and coughed, made a derogatory comment when he was handed the cup for his urine sample. In short, he was responsible for no less than five total blushes spanning the doctor and several nurses.

Richard stood off to one side, viewing the proceedings with amusement. He supposed there was some sort of underlying anti-establishment motive to Juju's display, but none of it seemed more serious than business as usual in the Garden. Juju would get a stern talking-to by the security chief, would spend the weekend behind bars, and then be released into the warehouse on Monday so the cycle could begin again.

(On the plus side, Richard noticed out of the corner of his eye that Gramma had intercepted one of the more familiar nurses and was apparently negotiating successfully for her meds.)

"They treat us like cattle," Juju said, reclaiming Richard's attention. Red as a lobster and obviously about ready to explode, he winced as the doctor gave him his

shot. "They come in here on *our* time—late, mind you—and have the nerve to tell us we're not cooperating, we're not going far enough out of our way to make their little visit here to Steel Garden a goddamned summer retreat—I should have pissed on the doctor's shoes, not in the cup."

Richard laughed, picturing such a feat.

Juju's face got even redder. "You think this is funny?" He swatted at Richard (who dodged deftly out of the way) and flashed a devious smile—a reminder that though he often lost his temper, he was not unkind.

The doctors, however, weren't aware Juju was anything besides a major handful. Subsequently, they made it their top priority to complete their tasks in record time so they could turn Juju over to the authorities and have him on his merry way. The instant they were through, the doctor nodded at the guards, who bound Juju's wrists again and hustled him out of the plaza.

Before leaving, he made a point of swooping his head close to Richard's and whispering, "The usual time, okay?"

Richard nodded and stopped at the plaza edge, watched as Juju—flesh shackled, but spirit soaring—and his captors receded down the walk.

* * *

The apartment was stifling.

Richard helped Grampa into his recliner by the rear window; Gramma went straight for the keg, fetched herself a glass of water.

"Did you get your meds?" Richard asked her.

Depositing herself in a chair, Gramma responded by holding up a pair of prescription bottles. With her hair matted and her cheeks flushed bright red, she looked absolutely beaten by the heat. "Bless Marion—that's the nurse's name—for keeping her promise. If it had been up to the doctor, my chart—your grandpa's too—would have been deleted long ago."

Richard felt Grampa tugging at his sleeve. He faced the man, saw, surprisingly, a glimmer of coherence behind his eyes.

"Some water, boy," Grampa whispered, focusing his gaze somewhere between Richard's head and the ceiling. "If it's not too much trouble."

Richard shook his head. "Of course not, Grampa."

He crossed the room, passing Gramma a hopeful glance as he fetched a glass from the dish rack, filled it with water from the keg, and then delivered it to Grampa.

"Good boy," Grampa said, drinking thirstily.

Richard watched him, wondered just how much of this moment of clarity he could capture before it receded. Sometimes it was weeks between such lapses, sometimes less. The dementia was a slow, corrosive process that produced bumps and hiccups in Grampa's mental state. All city-born folks had various levels of toxins in their bloodstreams, though Grampa had had the misfortune of being one of the unlucky ones whose symptoms had proved devastating. He rarely spoke to

anyone, rarely did anything besides sit and stare out the window, mumbling to himself in short gasps. It was easy to imagine his body as a mere shell, a flesh coverall encasing the *real* George Doroschenko—and on days like today, days when the man inside could be caught peeking out through the coverall peepholes, blinking around the room and trying to remember how he'd gotten there...Richard couldn't help but hope that maybe his grandfather would find the strength to finally burst free.

"I had a dream," Grampa said once he'd emptied his glass. "Seemed to go on for ever and ever. We were at the beach. All of us. You and Robert and Jana and me and Elda. I don't...I don't know which beach, but it was clean. No warning signs, no alien acids in the water. There were people everywhere...spread out on towels, sitting under umbrellas, kids playing with volleyballs and Frisbees, on the sand, in the water..."

"Wow," said Richard, kneeling beside the recliner and taking Grampa's hand in his own. "What else do you remember?"

Grampa seemed to think for a moment—perhaps tried to grasp something that didn't want to be grasped, for the light in his eyes shifted, the man within the man suddenly recoiling a step. "When are you going to cut your hair? Army'll never take you that way—"

"No, Grampa," Richard said, squeezing harder. "The beach, remember? We were all at the beach—you were telling me about it."

"Oh, yes...the beach..." Grampa smiled pleasantly, though it was obvious the memory was rapidly slipping away—

—Richard made a mental lunge. "I remember the beach too."

"You do?"

"Yes," continued Richard, catching that tiny bit of light behind Grampa's eyes and drawing it out, building upon it. "We went on vacation when I was little. At first you didn't want to go because you don't like the beach, but mom and dad begged and begged, and you finally gave in and went with us. You wore flannel over your trunks, remember? Everyone kept making fun of you because it looked like you weren't wearing anything at all under your shirt."

The smell of sand and surf filled the room, and the window, instead of framing the Steel Garden perimeter fence, now revealed an uncertain mesh, a wavering hint of a sprawling coastline that may or may not have ever existed.

Grampa's head turned slowly, and his eyes widened as he looked through the window, seeing, Richard knew...*remembering*. He started to work his jaw, the words trying to escape.

Richard held tight, thought of what to say next, where to take the story—

"Richard...don't."

Richard flinched, his concentration fractured. Gramma was standing behind him, and had put her hand on his shoulder. "Let him be."

It was only a moment's lapse, but it was enough to evaporate the ocean, dust away the sand. Richard jumped to his feet, facing Gramma. He wanted to swear out loud, to demand an explanation as to why his work had been trampled so, but

he never got out more than an exasperated sigh. Not when he saw Gramma's face, saw the tears streaking her cheek. She'd spent the last handful of years trying to adjust, to accept her husband's condition; every time Richard tried to cheat the circumstances, it was like stoking a half-healed wound. He didn't understand it completely, but he knew it wasn't his place to play doctor—at least, not now.

"I'm going up to the roof," he said at last. "Maybe you and Grampa want to come get some fresh air?"

Gramma shook her head. "No thank you."

"But you've been cooped up in here all day."

"Yes, but I haven't been physically exerting myself like you have. I can manage." She wiped a bead of sweat from her forehead.

Richard kicked off his boots and grabbed his rec coveralls, unzipping the arm and shin portions and tossing them aside. "I'll bring your laundry, then."

"I washed our things this morning."

Catching a pattern to Gramma's hesitance, Richard sighed inwardly and let the matter drop. He used to think it was merely the tenants in various states of undress waiting around for their laundry, the abundant unfamiliar faces that kept Gramma from partaking in what she often referred to as "that Foster lady's rooftop raves", but as of late he'd come to realize it was pride—Gramma didn't want the other residents to see the burden placed squarely on her grandson's shoulders. Pride or prejudice, it was one of those hot and humid evenings when the simple act of walking across a room felt like crawling across a ten-mile strip of desert at noon; all the world's oceans and jungles and microbes-gone-wild couldn't produce enough oxygen to seep its way into the Doroschenkos' apartment—and yet Gramma was adamant about sticking it out, keeping herself hidden away like an ill-favored tool on the back shelf of some storage shed.

"Okay, then," Richard said, heading for the door. "I'll bring some nuts and fruit back, and whatever else looks good."

Gramma nodded wordlessly.

Stepping out into the plaza (which was still bustling with doctors and nurses and overheated residents), Richard sneaked a quick shower and donned his rec clothes before making his way around to the back of building A, where the stairs were. He ascended them two at a time, rising above the sizzling pavement and sun-bleached sand and entering into Mrs. Foster's rooftop sanctuary—a canopied oasis that could be spotted from a mile away because it was the only building on campus that was covered edge to edge with abundant foliage.

Mrs. Foster, an extroverted gardener in her mid-forties, was building A's self-appointed stewardess. She managed everyone's affairs, made sure everything that needed to be done got done, made sure everyone was properly taken care of. Officially, she was merely a Steel Garden resident; *unofficially*, she was building A's go-between, dealing directly with the landlord and making sure her fellow workers were allowed certain amenities on a regular basis—and as long as the landlord kept her happy, she kept the residents of building A happy.

When she spotted Richard stepping onto the roof, she glided over to him,

welcomed him with a flamboyant hug and a kiss on the forehead.

"TGIF, dearie," she said, and took his work clothes. "Hottest day of the summer, today. Heard it on the news. They say it's those Kur martyrs messing with lava fissures in our oceans—as if the Pacific tsunamis weren't enough!" She placed his coveralls into a plastic bin and walked over to where a large table had been set between potted palms. The Peterson twins (blond-haired, blue-eyed, eight years old, both wearing cheerful expressions) were dropping ice cubes into plastic cups. "There's always some new catastrophe happening in the world—but never you mind all that. The work day is over, the bigscreen's battery is fully charged, and the girls here have just finished pouring the lemonade. Richard, would you be a dear and help pass out refreshments to everyone?"

Richard nodded and accompanied the twins—Jenna and Megan, respectively—as they made the rounds distributing watermelon slices and lemonade to the nearly two-dozen people lounging or milling about. The numbers often fluctuated, but Richard could always count on seeing the core handful: Chad, the Peterson twins' father, and a musician as well (who could always be found sitting in his own corner with a decrepit acoustic guitar and a small stack of wrinkled sheet music); Nina, Karla, Miranda, and Lily (the laundry women, in their late twenties or early thirties); Squirt (six years old, Karla's son); Magda, Eudora, and Welma—the Peeping Hags.

The Hags were old—the oldest residents on campus. Mrs. Foster was related to them in some way, though she'd never divulged exactly how. Physically in their seventies (but mentally still in their teens), they could always be found perched at the rooftop edge, where they processed the day's gossip and whistled at the men showering in the plaza down below.

The Hags' table was the last stop on Richard's circuit, because as foul-mouthed as they were, they always had the latest news—and that's what Richard wanted.

"How is my little big man?" asked Magda, the oldest.

"Fine as can be," Richard replied, serving the lemonade and watermelon. He handed his tray to Jenna, sent her and her sister off to Mrs. Foster. Then, sitting cross-legged on the ground: "The news, please."

Magda and Eudora both leaned back in their chairs. Their forte was gossip and matters of prurience; Welma's was current events.

"Young minds," she said, sipping her lemonade and exchanging amused glances with her sisters. "Always on task." She faced Richard. "We have a new campus guard on night watch. Fresh from boot camp."

Richard nodded. "Newbie, right?"

"*Newbie*. How appropriate." Welma chuckled. "Anyhow, it seems he has the integrity of a tumbleweed when pumped for information. Lips was working him over the night before last and she got him to tell her about a little military blunder. Do you remember the Red Rain last month?"

Richard nodded again. "It rained blood. They told everyone to stay inside."

"Not blood. *Microbes*. Nano soldiers built like viruses, except they do exactly what the scientists want them to do, and then they expire. You find them in

everything these days, from clothes to toys to medical utensils, but according to Newbie, our Kiengiri friends were supposed to use a particularly nasty batch of nano soldiers during an attack on the Kur. Wouldn't you know, though, the ship carrying the malaise was shot down—in our area, no less—and the little nano buggers were set free over our heads. We were all vaccinated that night, and the campus was cleaned up—but remember those three residents who came down with a cold a few days after?"

"Yeah," said Richard. "That woman and her kid from building C, and a man from building D. They transferred to another campus."

"Bah!" Magda spat, setting her cup down and slapping the table with her hand. "If that were true, we'd have heard about it beforehand."

"Indeed," Eudora agreed, nodding.

Welma continued: "They're *dead*, Richard. They caught the bug and it made them really sick. It wasn't supposed to happen, but you know those military types can't be trusted to handle their own secrets, much less a vat full of voracious germs."

Richard frowned. "Their shots must have been bad."

"Heh," Eudora grunted. "Must have."

The Hags shared a group scowl.

Momentarily, Mrs. Foster made an appearance. She'd brought a pair of large buckets, both of which she handed to Richard.

"Our laundry girls need water," she said. "If you ladies don't mind, I'd like to borrow this lug for a little while. I promise I'll have him back to you in pristine condition."

The Hags shrugged and turned their attention elsewhere—namely the plaza below—as they waited for their next male victim to brave one of the showers.

Satisfied with Welma's report, Richard, along with Chad and several of the other men, helped fetch water from the plaza. (There was a coin-operated laundry room at the south end of the building, though since Steel Garden's monetary system had been canceled a good many years ago, it was now merely a boarded up memory.)

Afterward, he sat with Jenna and Megan and played the obligatory game of cards as evening settled over the Garden. The gathered workers were casually chatting, sipping lemonade or iced tea as they watched the sunset and waited for the Sol Union address to go live. When it did, Mrs. Foster waved her arms in the air and shushed her guests, who assumed their various viewing positions—all except Chad, who remained in his corner (it was common knowledge that he didn't like politics, and that he despised politicians even more).

Richard faced forward and watched as the President of Earth, with his pressed black suit and stately gray hair, came to life on the screen:

"My fellow humans, Sol is under attack. Our *home* is under attack. The Kur have come to our system on a mission of conquest, with every intention of taking our world for their own—but we have made it perfectly clear Earth is not merely a gem to be cleaned, cut, and polished for the auction block. With assistance from

the Kiengiri, we have shored up our defensive forces. Thanks to the hard work and dedication of our young men and women, our military fleet is second to none—but our worker fleet is every bit as integral. The campus system is the backbone of our economic livelihood. You are our most precious resource in this monumental effort to rid ourselves once and for all from the scourge of the Kur. Were it not for your many hours of faithful service, we would have no military support, and the Kiengiri, our closest allies in this time of need, would have no sanctuary.

"Let us be honest: These are trying times, and the road ahead is difficult. The concept of family has never been as important as it is now and in the coming years. As humans, and as citizens of Sol, we must band together or risk being eradicated by an alien race that cares nothing for our way of life. Our children, our elders, our husbands and our wives, the wounded, and the ill—our loved ones: It is these people we must keep in our hearts and souls as we rise to meet each new day. The blood, sweat, and tears we spill, whether in a factory or on a battlefield, are our pledge of freedom, our promise of victory.

"These are indeed trying times. Bureaucracy often seems a trivial matter in comparison to the big picture, but it is crucial that the campus system function properly, lest the foundation of our great society crumble into ruins. I have spoken to various heads of state, and have made it my top priority to reinforce the backbone of our community. That means a call for more state and national funding so that we can improve our dedicated worker campuses. This includes a more efficient allocation of resources, and quicker medical response times.

"It won't happen overnight—but with patience, with perseverance, we will emerge triumphant. Thank you, and God bless."

The screen faded to black.

"Well," said Mrs. Foster, rising to her feet and moving to light several of the lanterns that hung along the roof's periphery. "If that wasn't the shortest pep talk I've ever heard..."

"Hear that?" asked Lily. "He called us *resources*."

"Smooth politician talk—" said Welma.

"—tailored specifically for clueless grunts like us," added Eudora.

"Waste of a download," confirmed Magda.

Richard stood, brushed off his bottom. "Probably never even been to a terra campus."

Mrs. Foster snorted disdainfully, turned and faced the group. "Probably never even been to *Sol*—but come now, everyone. Let's not bicker over our elected dunderheads. It's story time."

A light round of applause went up as, glasses in hand, everyone gathered in a small circle.

Richard remained standing, and assumed a thoughtful pose as he tapped his foot on the ground, shifting his gaze from one face to the next, searching for the right inspiration—

"My story," he began, smiling suddenly, "is about...a guitar..."

Chad, still in his corner, looked up—

"...and a woman—"

—stopped playing and, leaning his guitar against the wall, beamed brightly as he joined the group.

Richard paced slowly, delicately, back and forth before his audience as he lit the embers of his tale, as the rooftop came alive with the colors and smells of a land long ago and far away:

"Many, many years ago, back before the Sol Union and the Kur and the rising oceans, back when the desert was all rolling hillsides as far as the eye could see, there lived a farmer named Jacob, who was also a musician—a guitar player.

"One day, after selling all of his vegetables, he went for a stroll through the marketplace. There wasn't much to look at, as the afternoon was winding down, and most of the merchants had already packed away their wares for the day. But one little old man—a luthier—sat at his booth as dutifully as if the sun had just risen. He had a variety of stringed instruments for sale. What interested Jacob most was an old guitar." Richard scanned Chad's eyes. "It was a steel-string, solid rosewood. Beautiful. Jacob strummed a few chords and fell in love at once. He negotiated for nearly an hour with the merchant before agreeing to hand over his entire day's earnings in exchange for the guitar. He played it all the way home.

"The next morning, he brought the guitar with him to the marketplace and serenaded many a customer—one of whom was a beautiful woman named Lena. She told him his music had roused her from a long sleep, and that she was grateful for his song.

"Jacob took a liking to her right away, so much so that he invited her to have lunch with him. They sat in the meadow for hours, talking, laughing, and basking in the steel-string's bright and percussive sound. Long after the marketplace had closed and the sun had set, they shared their first kiss...and Jacob asked Lena to marry him. Lena accepted, but on one condition: they had to spend the night together. No scandal, no sex—just the two of them, overnight.

"Jacob brought her to his home and shared his bed with her, and, as per their agreement, did nothing more than kiss her goodnight and tell her he loved her before turning off the light and going to sleep.

"He awoke the next morning with Lena still in his arms. Not wanting to rouse her prematurely, he quietly left the bed and went to make breakfast. He set the table, laid out fruit, bread, cheese—and then he waited...waited...waited for Lena to wake up. When noon came and went and she still hadn't come out to eat, he got worried and returned to the bedroom. There she slept, peaceful—*too* peaceful, for she did not budge in the slightest when Jacob gently brushed her cheek, whispered her name. He tried opening the window, letting the sun in; he tried talking a little louder; he tried nudging her a little harder...but she would not wake.

"By now deeply alarmed, Jacob fetched the doctor, who performed a number of tests, all of which were inconclusive. Lena simply would *not* wake up.

"Heartbroken, devastated, Jacob collapsed onto the floor beside the bed and wept until he had no more tears at all.

"He reached for his guitar—and, quite unexpectedly, found a note tucked

between the strings. 'My love,' it read. 'It is morning and you have discovered my secret. I will not wake unless it is by your song. When you played in the marketplace, your abundance of heart and soul broke the spell—but I cannot take from you unless you are willing to give. I must hear a new song every morning for as long as we are married. If the songs run out, then I will sleep...indefinitely. So, you see why I wanted you to spend the night with me. If you can bear this burden, then I will be your wife. If you cannot, then all I ask is that you wake me this once so that I may say goodbye.'

"Jacob set the note on the table and thought for a while...*really* thought. He was a young man, in his twenties—Lena was just as young. Could he sustain her throughout her youth, into middle age and beyond? And if he ever stumbled? If his muse one day refused to cooperate?

"It was a difficult decision to make. Picking up his guitar, Jacob plucked a gentle tune, and Lena stirred, opened her eyes." Richard stepped forward, knelt before Nina and took her hand. "Jacob held her hand, helping her to sit up. 'Is this hello or goodbye?' Lena asked him.

"He said..."

Richard trailed off, his listeners gasping in surprise as a loud *boom!* sounded from the west. There was a moment of disorientation, a dozen minds suddenly trying to orient themselves between fantasy cottage and rooftop abode—then the second explosion sounded, closer, and the night was split wide open as a flurry of bots suddenly encircled the roof, their emergency lights flashing—

"It's a skirmish!" cried Mrs. Foster, jumping to her feet and waving everyone toward the stairs. "Everyone to the shelter! Now!"

There was no time to think, no time to process what was happening. Richard made a beeline for the stairs. It took an enormous effort not to step on anyone's toes, not to push or shove or simply jump over the railing in an attempt to reach the ground faster as all around the sounds of war closed in. At the bottom of the stairs, he couldn't help but pause momentarily to sneak a glimpse over his shoulder —this is what he saw: cobalt sky aglow with dozens of frantic pinpoints, soaring, swooping, diving toward the black horizon, some veering back up again, others spearing the Earth in fantastic plumes of light.

"Get to the shelter, Richard!" yelled someone behind him. He felt a pair of hands on his back, shoving him along, moving him forward through a sea of bodies, a symphony of screams and prayers.

It was dark in the plaza. The security phosphors had been switched off. Several people (the guards, most likely) had flashlights, and were no doubt trying to light the way to the shelter entrance, but to Richard it was all chaotic shards of light filtering in between a vast tangle of arms and legs. He was carried forward by the flow, and almost fell face-forward through the shelter's trapdoor, which didn't become obvious until he was very nearly standing on top of it. He followed the others down into an even blacker darkness just as a deafening explosion reverberated against the plaza walls.

The shelter was dark and dusty—and cramped. There wasn't the slightest bit of

light. Jenna and Megan cried for their parents. Everyone else was dead quiet as they listened to the foreboding exchange above. Most of the explosions were distant, but every so often a craft or projectile could be heard whizzing by overhead, causing the walls, the ceiling to shake. Steel Garden itself may not have been under direct attack, but right here, right now, with the quivering, trembling flesh of nearly a hundred frightened residents pressed against him, Richard knew he was utterly helpless, completely vulnerable—

—one more Union resource at risk of early expiration.

# Chapter 5

The skirmish only lasted a handful of minutes, though to many it was more like hours. When everyone was at last allowed to unpack themselves from the congested depths of the shelter, Richard climbed out into the plaza, took several deep breaths. There was smoke in the air, sirens were buzzing—people were distraught, children crying; no one seemed to remember where they lived as the guards shouted instructions over their megaphones.

Richard reunited Chad with his daughters, then pushed and shoved his way back to the shelter entrance, where he waited for his grandparents to emerge. When they did, a well-armed soldier in fatigues reiterated the guards' earlier instructions for all residents to return home at once.

Understandably, Grampa was in bad shape. He rambled, half-crying, and flinched this way and that as Richard helped Gramma guide him back to their apartment.

In the bedroom, Gramma said to Richard, "I think you should probably sleep out in the living room tonight."

"Maybe if I helped—"

Gramma shook her head. "No stories. Not tonight."

"But—"

"*Richard.*"

Frustrated, on the verge of blowing his lid, Richard grabbed his blanket, his pillow, and set himself up on the living room floor. There, he lay listening to the aftermath of a Friday evening gone terribly wrong: Grampa's whimpering, Gramma's desperate pleas for serenity, the neighbors' choked-up survival stories drifting in through the open window. Richard wanted to gather everyone in his arms and tell them it was all right, tell them the worst was past. Anything but to have the moment prolonged as such.

Closing his eyes, he slept for a few hours, but it was a feverish, fitful sleep, in and out. He woke up glittering with sweat, his heart hammering in his chest.

He'd almost forgotten about Juju.

It was a few minutes past midnight. Standing and slicking back his hair, he listened carefully and, hearing the sound of his grandparents' steady snoring emanating from the bedroom, tiptoed over to the rear window. He slipped outside, bare feet hitting the concrete without the slightest sound. He pondered making a quick trip up to the roof for his work clothes, just to have them on hand in the morning, but thought better of it as a patrol bot whizzed by. Though there was still the smell of flaming wreckage in the air, the immediate area surrounding building

A seemed to have sustained very little damage, if any at all. Richard suspected a fighter craft or two had gone down outside the perimeter fence, but other than that, it was just another blistering night in the Garden. No warning lights flashing, no legions of soldiers patrolling the shadows for anomalous intruders.

The guardhouse was south of the dormitory building, and was only moderately secure, as most Steel Garden residents behaved themselves relatively well. A squat building that resembled a storage plot more than it did a jail, it had locked doors and barred windows, but was otherwise completely accessible.

Richard crouched beside the first in a row of ground-level windows and peered inside. Not seeing anyone, he crept to the next window, peered inside, crept to the next, and so forth until he found Juju, who was pacing back and forth in his cell. He'd been cleaned up, given a new set of coveralls.

Richard squatted down low, gripping the bars with his hands. "Psst! Juju!"

Juju turned; when he saw Richard, he assaulted the window (and Richard) with a scowl and a barrage of seething whispers: "They left me in here, goddamnit! I watched the whole thing from *right here!* Fighters rolling into each other, the sky lit up with an unholy fireworks display, and not a single guard came to bring me to the shelter! Guards indeed—protecting their own *ass*ets at all costs!"

Richard caught himself chuckling and clamped his hand over his mouth. The severity of the situation had indeed dawned on him, but it somehow still seemed distant, unreal. Perhaps, he thought, it was his brain's way of dealing with the trauma he'd come close to realizing earlier while waiting for Gramma and Grampa to fall asleep.

"Well, there was a lot going on," he said. "People were running all over the place—the security team had to keep things in order."

Juju spat. "Oh, stop making excuses for them, Richard! They simply don't *care*. They put their soldiers through rigorous training programs. They know how to infiltrate enemy lines, how to survive in the field—they certainly know how to react during a time of crisis. Now, imagine enduring boot camp only to be shipped off to a worker campus out in the middle of the desert. Being here isn't a privilege, it's a chore. Babysitters in a glorified nursery."

"There were guards in the plaza," Richard pointed out, "and they seemed to be taking care of things pretty well."

"Bah! Appearances only. A crowd like that, and they *had* to do something—again, protect the campus assets at all costs! But someone like me, someone who has a habit of complaining once too often...I'll bet my right arm they can't get rid of me soon enough, put some mindless drone in my place. *Maximum efficiency*, you see."

Richard frowned and glanced over his shoulder. The area was well-lit; it wouldn't be long before one of the night guards spotted him and sent him packing. Looking at Juju once again, he scrunched himself lower and pressed his face against the bars. "You said you have a story for me?"

"Indeed I do," Juju sighed.

"It's a good thing they caught you, then," Richard jested.

"Firstly, I *let* them catch me. I needed an excuse to get back here and tell you what I saw. That, and I was out of water."

Richard laughed, though it was a nervous laugh. What if they *hadn't* found Juju? What if he'd gone for days without water, without food—

"They really put us out here in the middle of nowhere," Juju continued. "I passed a couple of unmanned communication towers. Other than that it's all sand and tumbleweeds, a few shrubs or trees if you're lucky. I didn't expect to make it all the way to Pacifica, but...they don't give us maps here, so I kept going west until I saw something of interest."

"Really? What?"

"*Activity*. Shuttles buzzing, bodies bustling about. It looked like an army unit was setting something up, and it was obvious they hadn't planned on having a spectator waiting on the fringe."

"What were they setting up?" Richard asked, his curiosity piqued.

Juju chuckled. "Well, that's when they caught me. They asked me the same thing as they were slapping me in irons. I, of course, merely launched into an indecipherable oratory about taxpayer dollars being used to fund covert military potlucks—insanity is a wonderful defense—but I knew what they were doing."

When Juju paused for effect, Richard shook his arms and whispered, "*Well*?"

"They planned it, Richard," said Juju. "The skirmish—it was a stage show."

Richard's jaw dropped. "How do you know?"

"I saw them setting up. There was a portable launchpad, two fighters, and a cargo shuttle—but that was it. You could tell it was a temporary camp that wouldn't last overnight. And you know what? During the skirmish, there were *two* explosions. Two fighters."

Richard tried to wrap his brain around the concept. "So...what, then? They faked the skirmish?"

"They faked it, or they did a damned good job of coordinating the two fighter crashes with an actual military strike."

"But...why?"

"Politics. Patriotism. The Sol War has taken twenty years from us, money and muster. The various human administrations are no doubt looking for ways to bolster support from their citizens and workers alike—and all this time I've never seen a single alien, good or bad. Have you?"

Richard hadn't.

"Oh, they talk about the human brain being hardwired for a specific feature set, how most of us would go blind or insane if we stared a Kiengiri in the face, but come now. I used to watch horror movies as a kid. Blood, guts, gore, zombies waltzing around the screen with lesions the size of mail slots—you name it—and I never had any nightmares, never had to have my head looked at by a psychiatrist. You're telling me I'd lose it if I so much as *peeked* at a Kiengiri or a Kur?"

"You think they're fake too?"

"No...no. We all saw the footage of the Kiengiri ships during first contact—and there were tens of thousands of amateur videos taken of the various landings.

However, I get the feeling that our government has struck a deal with the aliens behind our backs and kept the best parts for themselves, given the rest of us the shaft."

Richard thought for a moment. "You know, those horror movies you watched when you were little...you knew the movies were fake. Real life would be different. Mrs. Foster read me a book once. It was about war and how the soldiers who came back from fighting had their minds all messed up. It was too real for them."

"Well, I can sympathize—it's *war*. Violence. Inhumanity. The reporters aren't differentiating, however. They say that the Kur are our enemies, but that they're too ugly to look at, and so you never see them in the videos. I admit it may be a bit of a stretch, but, well, I'm at least sure about the skirmish. Extraterrestrial soldiers or movie effect creatures, last night's shenanigans *weren't* an accident, and they *weren't* caused by a Kur attack. Something's going on, Richard, and it's not what the babysitters would have us believe."

Juju fell silent, giving Richard a moment to digest what he'd just heard. He was feeling the aftereffects of the day. The skirmish was past, Juju was back...and yet things somehow weren't normal. There was a hesitation in the breeze, an underlying shifting of the sand, an unidentifiable taste at the back of Richard's throat.

"How about you?" Juju asked after a time. "You have anything for me?"

"News from the Peeping Hags," Richard said.

"Go on."

"You know the Red Rain?"

"God almighty. Yes."

"Well, I guess it was our fault and not the Kur's. Our soldiers were supposed to be helping the Kiengiri with a germ attack against the Kur, but the ship carrying the bugs was shot down—"

"—over our heads." Juju nodded, his eyes glistening with something monumental. "I have my own theory about that, you know it. They needed to test their plague before it was deployed, and so they tested it on us."

"Really, Juju," said Richard, shaking his head. "We're workers. They *need* us. The night of the Rain the doctors came out and gave everyone their shots. We're members of the Sol Union."

"Well, where's my friggin' membership card?" Juju snorted, folding his arms. "Jesus, look at us. Utterly clueless. I'd like to think I still have a good decade or two before the gray hairs come a'knockin'. And you, you're a young man! You should be out partying and meeting girls and smoking cigarettes, not fretting over whether or not your government is going to buy you dinner before it plows you up the—"

"I have a girlfriend," Richard said.

Juju smiled. "Really, now?"

"Her name's Alix. She lives over in building B."

"'Alix,' is it?" Juju knocked knuckles with Richard. "Tell me, has this lovely lass helped soothe the savage beast?"

Whatever *that* meant. "None of your business."

Juju laughed. “The perfect gentleman, I see.” Switching topics, he tapped Richard’s hand and asked, “Have you been practicing your letters?”

“I don’t need to,” Richard replied. “I can remember all my stories.”

“Assuming you’re alive.”

“Why wouldn’t I be?”

Throwing his hands up in the air, Juju said, “Oh, I don’t know—air raids, spilled germs, inevitable old age. God, man, were you out taking a leak during the skirmish? Did you not realize how little we mean to our benefactors?”

“The campus wasn’t hit.”

“It doesn’t matter! We were in the crossfire!”

That may have been true, but once again Richard’s brain refused to process the information properly. Or maybe he’d merely reached the limit of how many of Juju’s epiphanies he could digest in a single serving. There had been other skirmishes, few and far between, and, of course, the Red Rain, but Steel Garden itself had never inhered any damage. It just didn’t make any sense to attack a resident campus. The warehouse, maybe, but not the workers’ homes...unless the Kur really were truly and utterly heartless...

“You’ve got that look again,” said Juju. “Like a puppy dog trying to grasp an algebraic equation. But I guess it’s just as well we have this night to twiddle our thumbs. The day is coming when we’re all going to have to reckon with ourselves. The enemy within, and not some cosmic collection of quarreling aliens. I’m afraid that by the time the truth comes out, there’s a good chance none of us will be around to hear it.” He fixed Richard with a deadpan stare. “You practice your letters, you hear?”

Richard sighed. “I will.”

“Good. Now...” Juju left the window and spread himself out on his bunk. “... tell me a story. Something to put me to sleep.”

Nodding, Richard sat by the window a few minutes more and strung together words of rest and relaxation, calm and quiet. When he was done, Juju was snoring soundly, and Richard was reminded of his own exhaustion.

He left the guardhouse that wasn’t being guarded and made his way back home.

* * *

Shortly after dawn, a notice was slipped under the door of every apartment in building A. Richard found the Doroschenkos’ on his way to the keg for a glass of water.

It read:

Dear Steel Garden resident:

Due to recent circumstances beyond our control, the perimeter fence will now be live round-the-clock. As such, areas behind the dormitory buildings will be

off-limits until further notice. We apologize for the inconvenience and hope to have a resolution shortly.

Setting the note on the table, Richard filled his glass, downed everything in three breaths, and promptly went back to bed.

# Chapter 6

The weekend wound itself down. With Juju locked away there wasn't much for Richard to do except putter about. He tidied the apartment with Gramma, watched movies on the roof with Mrs. Foster's crew, went to Steel Garden's western perimeter and tossed pebbles at the fence (which responded by eliciting a series of vicious sparks and sizzles). He studied the terrain beyond the fence, looking for pockets of scorched earth, heaps of blackened metal, signs of Juju's conspiracy. There was, however, nothing but ordinary dirt and sand.

If the desert had its secrets, it wasn't giving them up.

And so the Garden fell silent, its residents moving to and fro, doing this, doing that, talking to one another in short clips, but not *really* talking. The skirmish seemed to have knocked the words right off everyone's tongues.

Bad things had happened before: previous skirmishes, wind storms, the Red Rain; though Richard hungered for meaningful discussion concerning the topic, he had learned over the years that not asking questions was the only socially acceptable course of action following any great catastrophe. So he put Friday night out of his mind, told himself he would have to wait until he next saw Juju to indulge his conversational muse. Juju being Juju and all, there was no doubt they would have much to keep themselves busy.

The only problem was, on Monday morning, during the walk to work, Juju *wasn't* Juju.

Not entirely.

"So, they let you go free after all," Richard said as they fell into step together.

"Wipe that smile off your face," Juju grunted. "Good cheer has no privileges at this ungodly hour."

"And it's not even eight o'clock yet."

Juju's face reinforced the fact: There were puffy circles around his eyes, and his normally whippet-quick clip had an uncommon drawl to it. "Don't remind me. Those guardhouse bunks are a layer of linen away from being cutting boards—I got maybe four hours of sleep before I had to up and face the warden's review panel. Bunch of cronies."

Richard nodded, gave Juju a moment's reprieve. Then: "You really think the military staged the skirmish?"

A snort from Juju. "Now there's an idea. I wouldn't put it past them."

"You seemed pretty sure the other night."

Juju blinked, stopped in his tracks. "Pardon?"

Richard stopped too. "You know, what we talked about when I visited you in

jail."

Juju looked as if someone had thrown a handful of sand at his face.

"*Saturday morning*," Richard specified, rolling his eyes. "You were telling me about your desert trip—you said there were army men up to no good."

There was a moment of delayed reaction as the total spectrum of human emotion washed over Juju's face. Settling on awed outrage, he swore under his breath and grabbed Richard by the shirt collar, pulled him off the sidewalk, from concrete to sand—as if doing so would render the two of them invisible to the other workers passing by.

"Unbelievable!" he hissed. "Tell me you're not yanking my chain!"

"Your chain?"

Juju rattled him. "A joke, a prank, boy!"

"I promise," said Richard. "I'm not joking."

Juju let him go and glared to and fro, over his shoulder.

"Juju, what's wrong?"

"Everything," Juju replied, his expression turning grave. "This whole situation. I *thought* it was strange, sitting and staring at the wall all day Sunday—that's what they put in my head, see?" He leaned in close again. "What did I tell you?"

Richard recounted Juju's late night tale in condensed form.

"God almighty!" Juju hissed, and slammed his foot into the sand. "That's too much to attribute to heatstroke! They did it! They erased my memory, the bastards! Why didn't I realize it before? An entire Sunday sitting and staring at the *wall?* Impossible!"

Richard bit his lip, tried to find a logical explanation, an answer where all answers, however viable, were unacceptable—

"No one gets wind of this," Juju said. "You understand? For my safety and for yours. Our benefactors may happen to be blundering idiots most of the time, they may not realize or care you were there with me that morning, but even so, you should watch your back. Don't trust anyone!"

Richard frowned. "Not even Mrs. Foster?"

"Well, she's all right."

"And what about the Hags?"

"Well—"

"And the laundry girls—"

"*Enough*, Richard," Juju said, exasperated. "You know who I mean. The guards, the security chief—anyone wearing fatigues. You follow me?"

"Sure."

"Good."

Juju stepped back onto the sidewalk and resumed his walk to the warehouse, Richard following along and trying to sort out a Checklist of Those Who Are Trustworthy in his head.

# Chapter 7

The workday, at least, progressed in a typically mediocre fashion. Richard loaded, unloaded, packed, and unpacked boxes; he ran messages back and forth between Klug's office and the various workstations; he helped to fix a broken forklift; he talked with the other men and women about minor matters: gossip, the weather, sports scores—anything but displays of great military force sent flaming from the sky.

When noontime came, Richard fetched his lunchbox from the locker room and exited the southern end of the warehouse. Here, there was a small yard sprinkled with canopied benches. Since Juju was evidently late, Richard settled for the alternative: sharing a bench with Grabs and Lucas (who was a year behind Grabs, and who seemed to glue himself to his partner solely for the purpose of maintaining a constant exchange of dirty jokes).

"Rich," said Grabs, making room for Richard. "You got here just in time—I was about to deliver last night's report."

"Let me guess," said Richard. "You and a random girl met out behind our building, and she was like"—he threw his arms up in the air, rolled his eyes back in his head—"and then you were like"—he stood up, made a ridiculous face, hunched himself over slightly as if assaulting an imaginary lover from behind—"and then it was over and you were making outlandish, unlikely excuses for going off so quickly."

Grabs blinked, his gaze somewhat distant as the slightest hint of a familiar, intimate scene tickled his memory. "How did you...?"

"I heard you," said Richard, chuckling as he sat back down. "Half the building did, probably. So sloppy, what you do. You're going to get one of those girls pregnant, if you haven't already."

"The kid knows his stuff," Lucas chuckled, patting Richard on the back. "Maybe I should start going to *him* for the inside scoop."

Grabs looked miffed. "*Maybe* Rich should start using his storytelling talent to his *own* advantage for a change."

Richard spread his hands. "Don't kill the messenger."

"He doesn't get it," Lucas said, still laughing (though the target of his amusement had changed).

"I don't get what?" asked Richard.

"You spend all your time talking to Juju," Grabs said, "when you could be talking that sweet little fox, what's her name? Alix?"

"Alix," confirmed Richard, nodding.

"Right. Alix. If I had a girl like her, and a gift like you, I'd be whipping up some major story time of my own."

Richard raised an eyebrow.

Lucas nudged Grabs in the ribs. "He doesn't get it, man."

"I don't get *what*, exactly?" Richard asked again.

"The *poontang*," said Lucas.

Richard didn't understand the word. "Who says I don't?"

"Jerking off doesn't count," said Grabs.

Richard fumed, but not necessarily because he wasn't getting any action, and not because masturbation didn't count. "You guys don't think about anything other than *that*, do you?"

"Nope," said Grabs.

"In fact," said Lucas, examining his sandwich, "I'm thinking about it right now." He trailed off, spread the bread apart, and started tonguing the meat in a scandalous manner.

Coincidentally, this was the very moment that Juju happened to walk up to the bench. When he saw what Lucas was doing, he frowned disapprovingly.

He said to Richard, "Are we having lunch together today, or should I leave you to your erotic pantomime?"

Glad for an excuse to leave, Richard said goodbye to the others and followed Juju to another bench.

"Were it not for your chronological proximity," Juju said, settling himself beside Richard and opening his lunchbox, "you and those lugs would have nothing in common at all."

Richard glanced over at Grabs' bench again, watched him mimic the motions of an experienced lover. No doubt he was performing a retell of last night and pouring on all the standard inconsistencies in the process.

"So tell me," Juju said, "everything about everything. Spill it."

Richard gave a detailed report, recounting Saturday morning's guardhouse conversation as Juju chewed thoughtfully.

When he was through, Juju nodded and said, "That bolsters my theories tenfold. By erasing my memory, those jackasses are trying to cover up their own cover-up." Juju spat, threw the remainder of his lunch to the ground.

"There's no littering," Richard reminded him.

"Bah! Let them clean it up! Treat their workers with disrespect, and their workers will treat *them* with disrespect!"

Richard fell silent; there was a piece of lettuce hanging from Juju's lip, but he told himself not to laugh. "Have you forgotten anything else?"

"Firstly," said Juju, "I haven't *forgotten* anything. I've been *robbed*, got it?"

Richard nodded.

"Good. To answer your question, then, no, I don't think anything else has been stolen from me. Mind you, it's no easy task taking inventory of thirty-eight years' worth of memories—but what else are they going to get from my head? Old girlfriends' phone numbers? That launchpad scene was the only piece of concrete

evidence I had. Now it's gone."

Juju's heartache was evident. Richard kept himself quiet for several minutes, feigning enthusiasm for his lunch. When he was done eating, when his water bottle was empty, he asked, "Do you really think they would do that to you?"

"Kiddo," Juju said, putting his hand on Richard's shoulder. "When are you going to get it through your thick skull? This is war, and not just between the Kiengiri and the Kur. You, me, and the rest of Steel Garden's residents, we're the absolute bottom-feeders, you understand? We're tolerated because the machines are too stupid to operate themselves—but if our *employers* aren't careful, there's going to be civil unrest."

"A revolt?" Richard asked.

"Maybe. You never know. They tighten the noose any more and there'll be no other choice. Too much pressure built up. Kill or be killed."

Richard thought about it for a moment, trying to imagine his neighbors running amok. "No one talks about the skirmish," he said.

Juju laughed. "That's because it's too much to talk about. You see, the way people's minds work, it's all or nothing. If you keep the lid on tight, then everything stays inside the pressure cooker, but you crack it just a bit, and you're in trouble. A word or two about what happened Friday night and all of the sudden you have tears, nervous breakdowns, post-traumatic stress disorders."

The work bell sounded.

"Speaking of stress..." Juju sighed and cleaned up his mess, headed back into the warehouse.

Richard followed suit, and wondered if perhaps his own mind wasn't invulnerable to living a pressure cooker life, if his constant attempts at allaying Juju's conspiracy theories and social concerns wasn't his own way of keeping the cooker lid capped tight so as to avoid a blowout.

# Chapter 8

Monday afternoons and evenings, the food truck graced Steel Garden with its presence—and there was always a line. On most occasions, Richard would wait a good hour or so after work before picking up his allotment, first having a shower, checking in with Gramma and Grampa, and then approaching the distribution area well after the mob had thinned to a manageable level. Today, however, he was a bit more tired than usual, and so went straight there, immersing himself in the swarms of irritable, sweaty workers, and fingering his dog tag as he waited for the line to move. Something was wrong, though—he picked up on it instantly, the irregular ebb and flow of ambient conversation, the intensity of the residents' voices increasing, someone shouting, arguing.

Pushing his way through the crowd, Richard reached the distribution table and discovered the source of the argument: Mrs. Foster. She was taking on one of the delivery men.

"I told you," she said, "there's been a mistake. This is the *wrong* shipment."

Richard glanced at what the delivery people had unloaded, saw boxes and crates filled with perfectly symmetrical stacks of nutrition bars and vitamin drinks (instead of the usual fruits, vegetables, meats, flour, and the like).

"Ma'am, please," said the delivery man. "This is standard campus issue. There's been no mistake."

"You're new here," said Mrs. Foster, "so I won't hold it against you, but we have a system. I ensure the landlord that I will keep everyone and everything in good working order. In return, my building is guaranteed a moderate selection of whole foods. I've upheld my end of the bargain for nearly twenty years now—surely you must have a record of our agreement on file somewhere!"

The delivery man put on a sympathetic look. "Ma'am, please—it's not my responsibility, and even if it was, there's nothing I can do about it because I just deal with the deliveries. They pack the trucks back at the base, and we drive them out. If there's been a mistake, you'll have to take it up with your landlord. I'm sorry."

Mrs. Foster let out an exasperated sigh and looked at the second delivery man, looked at Richard; someone at the rear of the crowd shouted, "This is bullshit!"

Others started in as well:

"Give us our food!"

"We don't have to take this!"

"Come on, everyone, let's send a message back to the base!"

The crowd pushed forward, and before Richard knew it, he was swept up in a

wave of agitated bodies, lifted off his feet as the teeming masses screamed and shouted and rushed the distribution table. He was literally tossed onto the tabletop and had to roll between the very surprised-looking delivery men to avoid bowling them over. The men called for order, but it was no use, for the mob's momentum had already carried it too far, no turning back—Richard knew if he didn't get out quick, he might not get out at all.

Dodging, climbing, and crawling his way out of the mess, he found Mrs. Foster standing at the periphery and holding herself as she witnessed the chaos.

"Are you okay?" he asked, jogging up to her.

"No, Richard," she said, quietly. "No I'm not."

Richard looked her over, saw that she was physically sound, then glanced over his shoulder. "We should go. The guards will be here any second—there might be trouble."

Mrs. Foster nodded and followed him back to the plaza, which, empty, reverberated with the sounds of the riot.

"Juju was right," Richard said, something ominous tugging at the fringes of his subconscious. "He was talking about too much pressure earlier, and now it's happened." It was terrible to think of what was going through the minds of his neighbors—but at least now it had happened, it was done. People would go to jail for a while, there would be a scolding tomorrow, but the pressure had been released.

Things could at last return to normal.

"Looks like you've come away with a souvenir or two," Mrs. Foster said, trying unsuccessfully to affect a smile.

Richard looked down at his hands, only now realizing that he'd somehow snagged a handful of nutrition bars during his escape from the riot scene.

"Go on home," Mrs. Foster said. "If they ask you where you were when this happened, say you were in bed."

Richard nodded, and returned to his apartment.

"What's that?" Gramma asked as he deposited his stash on the kitchen table.

"Dinner," said Richard.

# Chapter 9

The rooftop was somewhat barren that evening. Chad and Karla were missing in action, which meant Jenna, Megan, and Squirt were without parental supervision (Mrs. Foster had already set up makeshift beds for them in her apartment, just in case). Additionally, there were bots everywhere. The guards hadn't locked down the dormitory area, but it was obvious security had been bolstered.

Nevertheless, laundry had to be washed, movies downloaded, and gossip distributed accordingly, lest the severity of it all sink in too hard and too fast.

As such, it was *almost* a normal Monday evening. Richard sat with Mrs. Foster, the remaining three laundry girls, Juju (who, amazingly enough, had missed the food truck riot due to an uncannily-timed bowel movement), and the Hags. The usual, nameless regulars were present as well, but they stuck to their own corners, speaking amongst themselves in hushed, clipped voices, and only interacting with Richard's group to hand over their dirty clothes or help fetch water for the wash.

The food truck riot had been ugly. Tables had been overturned, blows exchanged, arrests made. This was reported dutifully by Squirt, who sat on Welma's lap and munched homemade oatmeal cookies (given the right circumstances, the Hags were quite capable of suspending their adolescent libidos and tapping into their grandmotherly sensibilities).

"Twenty-two in all," Squirt said between chewy mouthfuls. "I counted. Lots of people had black eyes and bloody noses, and they were yelling and crying a lot."

"They wouldn't let me see anyone," said Miranda, running a pair of coveralls over the washboard. "I asked what they were doing concerning medical attention, but they told me I had to leave."

Mrs. Foster shook her head. "Even after the skirmish there hadn't been this much attention from the security people. There's never been an upset like this. I mean, we've had our share of bumps in the road, little arguments, misunderstandings—but never anything this big."

Jenna, who was half-heartedly playing the obligatory game of rummy with Richard, set her cards down and sulked. "I miss daddy," she whimpered.

Richard set his cards down, too. "It's okay. The worst is over. You'll see him soon."

"I beg to differ," said Juju, who was sitting with his back against the roof wall. "Tomorrow there will be twenty-two fewer workers at Klug's disposal, which means the rest of us will have to pick up the slack. I wouldn't be surprised if lunch is cut out entirely. Tempers will be short, egos aflame. And there will most certainly be a delay as whatever asinine landlord they appoint to us this time around tries to

muddle his way through the food truck error. In the meantime, we're going to have to ration what we have from the previous week's allotment, all while Parsons' precious bots record our every move, our every word."

Mrs. Foster gave Juju a sarcastic scowl. "Aren't we the optimist. I'm beginning to understand why you never had children."

"Optimism is for fools," Juju said. "Teach our kids not to expect the world's attention to be lavished upon them. 'Somehow it will all work out' doesn't cut it. You can't *let* things happen. You have to push your way through to the source of the problem and *fix* it."

Jenna sobbed some more and said that Juju was making her sad.

"*Juju*." Mrs. Foster stepped up the intensity of her scowl.

"Fine," Juju sighed, throwing his hands up in the air. Putting on a ridiculous smile-face, he faced Jenna and said, "I was wrong, sweetheart. Tomorrow the ice cream man is coming to Steel Garden and he's going to make you the most delicious banana fudge sundae you ever had and it's going to fix everything."

"I didn't mean you should lie," Mrs. Foster said.

"Optimism, lies—they're not so different, are they?"

Mrs. Foster shook her head and turned to Richard. "I think we'd do well to put the worst out of our minds. At least, for the time being. Do you have anything for us tonight, Richard?"

Richard thought for a moment. Then: "Close your eyes, everyone," he said, getting to his feet. "You too, Juju."

Juju scowled. "You know I hate this hypnotic crap—"

"Don't be a baby about it," said Richard.

"Yes," added Magda. "Show a little manhood behind the meat."

Eudora tittered; Welma nodded appraisingly.

"Unbelievable!" Juju exclaimed. "I get a reprimand for spreading a little honesty, but the cronies here can ogle me openly and everyone gets a laugh for it!" He closed his eyes.

Richard stepped between his listeners. He considered telling something outlandish, something to take everyone away from the immediate, the present—but then he realized he would be defeating his own purpose. Regardless of the recent upheavals to have stricken Steel Garden, he wanted his fellow workers to feel comfortable.

At home.

"Does anyone recall," he began, "the last day of the astrologer?"

Laughter and groans of remembrance reverberated across the rooftop. Through Richard's effortless ministrations, perceptions shifted, eyes flicked open, and Mrs. Foster's abode became flooded with remembered sunlight as trees, plants, and people grew backward a full year.

"Sylvania Trinity," Mrs. Foster said, chuckling.

"Yes," said Richard. "Sylvania Trinity. Makeup like the tackiest circus clown you ever saw." He winked at Juju. "Dressed so gaudy you could see her from outer space." He looked at the Hags and tapped his finger against the side of his head.

"Predictions about as useful as a raincoat in the summertime."

"I'll say," Welma muttered under her breath.

"For the longest time," Richard continued, "the landlord was touting the importance of regular 'counseling' during wartime, and was always telling us that we should go and see Ms. Trinity, but no one ever did—so *she* came up *here*, this last day before she decided Steel Garden couldn't be saved." Richard put his hand to his ear, listening. "Shh! What's that?" He took a step back suddenly—at which point the air in front of him shimmered, and, in a puff of red smoke fringed with purple sparks, Sylvania Trinity herself stepped out of nothingness, bringing with her a barrage of hugs and kisses for everyone.

(Of course, since she was Richard's caricature, her breasts were twice as ominous, her colored robes a dozen shades too colorful, and her demeanor more righteous than it should have been—but the effect seemed to work.)

When she was through, she stood at the head of the group and gestured for everyone to line up.

"Come! Come!" she said. "Don't be shy! Predictions! Insights! There's something for everyone!"

The Hags, stoking a collective scowl, remained seated; everyone else (Juju grudgingly) complied.

Sylvania moved from person to person in quick succession.

To the laundry girls she said, "Nina! Miranda! Lily! True love awaits you in the vicinity of building C! I see a trio of soiled coveralls belonging to three eligible bachelors—but only while Mercury is in retrograde!"

To Mrs. Foster: "Lose the eyeliner, honey! Middle age is to be celebrated, showcased! You are the stateswoman—you will find that as you accept the advancement of your latter years, so will your fellow residents accept *you*."

To Juju: "Mr. Ngungu!" She placed her hands on his shoulders. "When will you learn that the key to a healthy relationship is *fidelity*? Oh! How many lovely ladies have willingly given themselves to fits of passion only to waken the following morning in an empty bed?"

Everyone cooed.

"The curse of the well-endowed!" Eudora proclaimed.

Partly serious, mostly not, Juju flicked her off.

Sylvania moved in front of Richard, placed her hand against his chest and smiled. "Oh, Richard, with a heart of gold. Sound of body, but the mind meanders. During your next school lesson you will be presented with a choice: study or squander. Good things await if you choose the former."

Richard made an incredulous face. Of course, every one of Sylvania's prospects was bunk. The laundry girls were all married, Mrs. Foster *didn't* wear makeup, and Juju was one of the *least* promiscuous residents Steel Garden had ever seen (and was, quite possibly, the only single adult male who didn't pay regular visits to Lips' apartment). As for Richard himself, he'd never considered his mind as *meandering* at all. He *liked* studying with Gramma or Mrs. Foster, and though he wasn't entirely keen on refining his writing skills, he remembered each and every bit of

history or literature he was taught.

But Sylvania was oblivious. She went right on rattling off her pre-recorded list of misguided epiphanies and overgeneralized insights, sparing no one until at last she was finished, mission accomplished, hearts and minds liberated. Blowing another round of kisses, she pranced purposefully toward the stairs. However, a handful of steps along the way, the heel of her left shoe very literally snapped off and she stumbled, collapsed in a fluttering, panting kaleidoscope of fashion sense gone wrong.

Mrs. Foster rushed forward to help her up. Richard followed, found Sylvania's heel and handed it to her—at which point she huffed some more and sped off across the roof, down the stairs. Out of their lives forever.

"Not that I'm wishing her any ill will," Nina said when Mrs. Foster and Richard rejoined the group, "but being part psychic and all, couldn't she have seen that coming?"

"Another wasted bit of campus funds," said Magda.

Juju snorted. "Makes me glad we don't work for money."

"Hear, hear!" cheered Eudora.

"'Lose the eyeliner,'" Mrs. Foster said. "Hmf! She's one to talk, what with her face layered like that! And as for *middle age*..."

Everyone laughed, raised their glasses and finished off their drinks as the here and now sank back in. Richard watched his neighbors' faces as time fast-forwarded, as wrinkles deepened ever so slightly and gray hairs became slightly grayer. He saw Mrs. Foster watching him, and he imagined his metamorphosis through her eyes, his hair becoming shaggier, his jawline sharper, his shoulders broader.

The others must have been taken aback as well, for they fell silent, looking at each other, catching up.

"Well," said Mrs. Foster, rising. "I think we've all had enough for one day, and I'm sure the children are just about ready to conk out for the night."

She looked wistful. Richard knew it was more than just leaving old memories behind—the food truck riot had scarred her—but he kept quiet as he helped gather up everyone's glasses, helped the women tidy the rooftop. When he was done, Lily hugged him goodnight and handed him his work coveralls.

Juju was waiting for him in the plaza.

"What *is* that?" he asked, pointing at Richard's head.

Richard wiped his hand across his brow. "What's what?"

"Those parlor tricks you do when you tell stories. I don't think I've ever asked you about it. One minute I'm sweating bullets up on the roof, the next I'm somewhere else, cruising the coast in my Mercedes, or sipping champagne on the beach, or, like tonight, watching a reincarnated version of Sylvania Know-It-All parade herself around in the flashback from hell."

"They're just memories," Richard said, shrugging. "I only make up the little things."

"But how did you learn such tricks? How does it *work*?"

Another shrug. "I don't know. Gramma says she used to tell me stories when I

was little, and when I learned them and started telling them *back*...she said she'd never seen anything like it. She says I must have some kind of gift."

Juju snickered. "And no one's ever offered to cut you up into little pieces for research?"

"No."

"Theater, then."

"No—"

"Imagine the audiences! They'd be spellbound—literally! None of the landlords ever offered to sell you off for a pretty penny?"

"I'm no actor, Juju."

"Still! You'd find a niche."

"What for?"

"A life!"

"I already have a life," Richard said.

Juju rolled his eyes. "But don't you feel the slightest bit put off that you've been relegated to using your gift for personal propaganda only?"

"Propaganda?"

"I know what you were doing up there during story time," Juju said. "People were having their doubts, and you tried to dash them all away. Keep everyone's minds off the thousand little inhumanities dumped on us at the government's whim—but you ever stop and think that maybe things would be better off if people *were* upset, disgruntled?"

Richard bit his lip and brushed his foot over the warm concrete. "How could that be?"

Juju waved his hand in the air. "Because things get *done* when people are upset! I know it's hard for you to understand—you were born here. The other campus children probably feel the same way, but us old fogies...this isn't our home. It's *never* been home. It never will be. They erased my memory, Richard. Who's to say what else they do when we're asleep or not paying attention? And the riot...instead of putting their workers' needs first, they stick to bureaucratic fluff—the right hand doesn't know what the left is doing. Play it off as a mistake when really they've been planning to screw us all along, one amenity at a time."

"Juju, we have this conversation every day," Richard said.

"Yeah, well, I'm going to keep repeating myself until my point hits home."

"What point, exactly?"

"Let's say there's an assembly tomorrow, and that tyrant of a security chief Parsons mandates that we'll all be given shackles—for our own *protection*, of course. So we can't *hurt* each other, you see. What would you do then?"

"Parsons wouldn't do that."

"But if he *did*?"

"He wouldn't. How would we be able to work?"

"It's a hypothetical, Richard."

"So?"

"What if," Juju continued, now putting his arm around Richard, "you could

have diverted today's riot entirely with just a few well-executed words? You get my drift?"

Richard squirmed, the thoughts, the possibilities suddenly swirling in his mind —a Juju-induced maelstrom. "You mean, by telling a story? But how—I've never..."

Juju chuckled, letting him go. "Relax, kiddo. I'm not talking about mass hypnosis or anything. An edge—for yourself, your family, of course, and maybe for your ol' pal Juju, too. Maybe you were too young to think about these things when you were a kid. Now, though, you're a man. You can make your own decisions. You can take action."

"I still don't understand what we're talking about," Richard said, truthfully enough.

"You took control of the situation on Friday morning. I needed a distraction to get away and you stepped right up to the challenge, didn't miss a beat. I've seen you do it dozens of times without even realizing. You could do it again, and not just to a half-witted campus guard like Newbie."

Richard blinked, Juju's point suddenly resonating within.

"Goodnight, kiddo," Juju said, winking as he turned away.

"Goodnight," Richard heard himself saying.

But his mind was already miles away.

# Chapter 10

As expected, as predicted—as mandated by Klug and his megaphone—there was an assembly on Tuesday afternoon, just before the lunch bell. Everyone was wrangled around one of the loading docks, where a podium had been set up, and where Security Chief Parsons and several of his men had arranged themselves strategically behind their nervous-looking foreman.

Richard pushed his way to the front of the crowd, saw Klug conferring with someone of equal stature. After a moment, he stepped behind the podium and, looking like a mussel out of its shell, addressed his workers:

"You may have noticed that we have an abundance of guards here with us this afternoon. While this is no doubt an inconvenience to many of you, it's nevertheless necessary. One, because there have been reports of renegade Kur soldiers in the area, and two, because yesterday's riot has demonstrated the need for improved campus security."

People groaned, uttered half-spoken insults. Richard felt the man standing next to him go rigid.

"People," Klug said, raising his hands, his gaze darting to and fro, never touching the same face twice. "People… *people*. I don't like it any more than you do, but I think we can all agree that our fellow workers' behavior yesterday was totally and completely uncalled for. Protocol was broken, property was damaged, injuries sustained. Behavior like that just won't stand. As such, there are going to be a few changes around here—for your protection, and for the protection of our fine campus."

Richard held his breath. *For our own protection*, Juju had said—

"Tensions are high," Klug continued. "Tempers are short. This is war, and the whole world is trying to keep on its feet, but like it or not, we're here to do a job, to serve the Union. When a riot breaks out, I look bad, you look bad—the entire *campus* looks bad. Now, understandably, there's been some miscommunication between the ranks, so our landlord, Mr. Sigler here, will outline some of the changes to be expected in the coming weeks and months."

Klug stepped aside, and Sigler, the man with whom he'd been conversing earlier, assumed a post behind the podium. Richard could tell immediately that his fellow workers didn't like Sigler any more than they liked Klug, for it took almost a whole minute for the idle commentary to die down.

When at last Sigler's voice could be heard, he cleared his throat, fingered through a small stack of index cards he'd brought with him, and said, "Good afternoon. First things first, allow me to express my appreciation for being able to

work with the good folks here at Steel Garden. There's a saying we have back at the office: If you want a good cup of coffee, go to Heenan's off Route 203, but if you want the best shuttle components this side of the levees, make sure they're grown in the Garden."

Klug chuckled. The sound reverberated throughout the warehouse, which, save for some background noise created by the machinery, was utterly quiet. The workers, having wrangled themselves to give their speaker the benefit of the doubt, now waited for something meaningful to be said.

"Yes," said Sigler, suddenly fiddling with his glasses. It seemed he was only now aware he hadn't been called in to make smalltalk. "Anyhow, I know many of you have enjoyed certain privileges concerning food and amenities. Unfortunately, due to budget cutbacks, Steel Garden must adopt a more stringent nutritional program."

"So it wasn't a mistake," said the man standing beside Richard. "This week's food shipment."

"Not at all," Sigler replied. He produced a colorful chart, which he held up for everyone to see. "Though it might seem troublesome at first, there are actually a number of health benefits to the new program. Based on traditional meal plans, the human digestive process is woefully inefficient. There's a lot of excess, a lot of extra heat created during sugar and fat conversion, and afterwards, much of what we eat gets excreted. Our Kiengiri friends realized this long ago and have since adapted their own diets to provide maximum efficiency. It was a natural progression for the technique to be expanded planet-wide. The Kiengiri have been working with Earth's top scientists, dietitians, and the like to come up with a sort of 'clean burning' approach to meet our workers' nutritional needs." Sigler switched charts. "Proteins, carbohydrates, and fat are combined with specially engineered digestive pre-enzymes..."

Sigler went on in such fashion for a good ten minutes, spewing out scientific factoids and random statistics, but no one was listening. Bodies were rustling, voices bubbling with protest. Richard felt his palms grow slick with sweat, and he knew things were heading in the wrong direction. The situation was slipping out of hand—

—again.

He couldn't help himself. Thinking of what Juju had said last night, he stepped forward slightly, raised his hand. "Excuse me?"

Sigler gave him a desperate look. "Yes?"

Richard swallowed, waited a moment for the more agitated voices to settle. Then he asked, "Correct me if I'm wrong, but what you're saying is...we're being put on a diet that'll prevent us from taking dumps?"

Sigler's jaw dropped, and suddenly all was silent. Even the machinery seemed to sputter to a stop as the young man with the potty mouth squirmed against the heat of the attention he'd so eloquently invoked. Without looking, Richard knew everyone within visual range had their eyes on him, mouths hanging open, bodies frozen, souls poised on the cusp of two separate outcomes, one feasible, the other

devastating—

—the man standing beside Richard started chuckling. It was a choked, poorly-contained sound, and it quickly snowballed into a full-blown bellow. He patted Richard on the back, and soon everyone in the room was following suit, giggling, tittering, laughing, and bawling, their hearts out, their various outrages temporarily forgotten as they shared a ridiculous moment together.

The only ones not breaking the slightest smile were Klug, Sigler—and Parsons, who assaulted the podium with his massive frame and hawk's stare.

"Quiet!" he roared, displacing Sigler with a less-than-eloquent shove. "Let's not forget that this is a serious matter, and that we must address it as such!" He pounded the podium with his fist.

The workers settled themselves, but not before they were good and ready (it was, Richard supposed, their only way of exerting control over the situation).

Parsons waited, stewed in his own juices as the merriment ran its course, as people dabbed at their eyes with their shirtsleeves and fell into each other's arms for support. When at last he had a sufficient percentage of everyone's attention, he stepped out from behind the podium and started pacing back and forth, scrutinizing the head of the crowd. "Steel Garden is not a playpen. It is a place of business. You are the employees. You are also in the unique position of being residents as well. I understand that combining home and work can be challenging, to say the least—but if there's a problem, you come to *me*. You do *not* scream and shout and throw things." Parsons stopped in front of Richard, leaned forward so that their faces were level. "What's your name, son?"

"Richard."

"Richard. Tell me...you're a law-abiding resident, aren't you?"

Richard nodded. "Yes."

"A good hard worker?"

"Yes."

"And if you saw someone doing something bad, or if you knew they were *going* to do something bad, you would know to tell your parents?"

"My parents are dead," Richard said.

Foregoing any sympathy, Parsons frowned. "Your legal guardians, then."

Richard bit his lip, searching Parsons' eyes. Usually he could get a sense of what a person wanted by studying their gaze, but Parsons was all steel doors and concrete walls. As such, Richard could only offer a nod, a shake of the head—total agreement under any circumstances. "I would tell them, sir."

Parsons nodded, smiling. "That's good, because I don't have time for wise-asses."

"Wise-asses, sir?"

"I don't appreciate vulgarity either."

"I don't understand, sir." Which was true enough, for though Richard had perhaps used the word "dump" (and now "asses") superfluously, he was genuinely curious as to why the Garden's administration was risking worker apathy to spare the campus washroom toilet bowls a few hundred bare bottoms.

For a moment, Parsons looked as if he wanted to say something else to Richard, but instead he straightened again and, nostrils flaring, launched into a speech about protocol, accountability, and consequences—more guards, more stringent check-in times, and longer jailhouse stays for those who disobeyed.

Richard listened to the first five minutes or so before slipping away unnoticed and making his way to the washroom. He let himself into one of the stalls, closed the door, and stood motionless as he considered the ramifications of what had been set forth at the loading dock. Klug and his stooges had skirted the issue with bureaucratic talk and fancy presentations, but their message was clear: change was at hand. In the space of a single weekend, there had been a skirmish, the activation of the perimeter fence's security system—and now there wasn't going to be any food. Not real food, anyway.

Richard wasn't sure how to take it all. Things were changing, that was for sure, but it was difficult to know what was what. Juju was almost certainly having a coronary over the whole situation. He would no doubt be running door-to-door after work and shouting, "I told you so!" to anyone who would listen. Richard couldn't blame him. Certainly there *was* a war going on, and certainly there *were* Kur soldiers prowling about; the perimeter fence was necessary, sure, and budgets were tight—but he wondered why, if the campus moguls had been able to feed everyone for twenty years, they were suddenly stopping now? Was the situation really that bad? Was it *really*?

He closed his eyes and, willing his mind away from the present, felt the floor ripple beneath his feet, felt his boots dissolve, the fabric of his coveralls unravel and fall away like layers of dead skin. He imagined his body constricting itself, all his cells spiraling backward through the years. When he opened his eyes again, he was standing in his underwear outside his grandparents' apartment with his shorts, T-shirt, socks, and shoes bundled in his arms. Gramma was beside him; a large garbage bag filled with the Doroschenkos' laundry rested at her feet. Down the way, a pair of guards were tending to the neighbors, who were also dressed down, and who were exchanging their various bundles of clothing for campus issue. The guards moved quickly from person to person, collecting everyone's laundry and tossing it into a large bin in the center of the plaza.

"Gramma?" Richard asked.

Gramma shifted ever so slightly, keeping her chest and crotch strategically hidden as if she were completely naked. "Yes, Richard?"

"Why do we have to give the guards our clothes?"

"Because that's the deal. That Foster lady has been talking with the other building liaisons, and they've all agreed that we don't want the chips."

"Chips?"

"Little grains of plastic," Gramma said. "They go just under your skin for tracking, but I don't know a single soul on campus who wants one. So we've compromised. They're putting the chips in a special set of clothes instead. Everyone gets two sets: one for work shifts, one for rec time."

Richard gazed down the walkway again. He saw a pair of soldiers trying to work

with a woman who was obviously averse to undressing in public. She insisted on changing inside her apartment, but the guards were telling her there wasn't time, they needed to get on with their work. There were other people who seemed distraught as well. Many simply stood and scowled as their clothes were taken from them. Some cried.

Richard looked at Gramma again. She wasn't crying, but she was close. "What are they going to do with everyone's old clothes?"

"I suppose," Gramma said, "they'll give them to poor people in the city."

Nodding, understanding, Richard stood straight and waited. When it was his turn to hand over his bundle, he smiled proudly and said, "I hope they fit."

The soldier took his clothes, and with an efficient motion, reached out and scanned Richard's dog tag. Then he grabbed a set of neatly-folded coveralls from the cart, ran his instrument over them, and handed them to Richard (boots as well), before moving on to the next apartment.

Richard set his boots down on the concrete and lined them up with his feet. "They're my size," he said. He held up his coveralls, examining them inside and out. He slipped into his new clothes. The coveralls were comfortable—snug, but not tight—and the boots fit perfectly. He didn't understand why so many people seemed put off by the new dress code. Everyone had a uniform now, everyone was official. Richard too—he was a big boy now. A member of the *team*.

He took Gramma's hand. "Don't cry. See?" He spread his arms, did a few squats. "It fits real nice. You'll like it."

Gramma smiled sadly, reached out and brushed Richard's cheek—and at that moment her features blurred, the wall behind her sliding sideways in a dizzying rush. The afternoon hiccuped and became early evening, the sunlight turning amber as Richard found himself standing at the southern end of building A. He'd insisted on following the soldiers as they'd hauled the laundry bin out of the plaza, and now he watched them dump everything into the trash compactor. It didn't occur to him that this meant the campus workers' clothes were most likely *not* going to be donated to the poor, for he was entranced by the way the machine worked, the noises it made as it compressed every last garment into a series of easily-manageable cubes.

Momentarily, Richard felt a hand on his shoulder. He looked up and saw Mrs. Foster, now wearing her new coveralls, standing behind him.

"Staying out of trouble?" she asked.

Richard nodded. "Yes, ma'am."

Mrs. Foster massaged his shoulders. "It's not right, is it? There used to be color here—they took away the grass and trees to conserve water...now even the people themselves have been stripped of their flare. Everything is sand and concrete and khaki."

Richard heard her sniff, and he knew she was crying. Still, the meaning was above him. He knew it meant something, he knew he *wanted* to understand, but he didn't know *how*.

So he retreated, blinked his eyes several times, forced his mind to focus on the

world outside the world as the dusty interior of the washroom stall solidified around him and cut off his view of Steel Garden's desert promenade.

He exited the stall, went to the sink and splashed some water onto his face. There was a small poster hanging on the wall beside the soap dispenser; it depicted an exuberant-looking cartoon man beaming with pride as he washed his hands. Above his head, a text bubble containing large, cheerful letters, read: A HAPPY WORKER IS A GERM-FREE WORKER!

Richard frowned and left the washroom.

Lunchtime was half over.

# Chapter 11

"I hear you diverted another catastrophe today."

Richard looked up from his worksheet. He'd been sitting quietly (along with the Peterson girls) at Mrs. Foster's kitchen table and working on his mathematics, though he'd known all along it had been a farce, an ulterior motive on Mrs. Foster's part. She'd grabbed him right after work, insisted that he go with her to her apartment for a school lesson. There, she'd sat him down, shoved a pencil and some paper into his hands, and offhandedly instructed him with his exercises—but he could tell from the way she'd paced to and fro, saying not two words in a ten-minute space, that she had other matters on her mind.

"I asked a question," Richard said. "Everyone seemed to think it was funny."

Mrs. Foster nodded, pretending to be interested in how Megan was progressing on her worksheet.

"You want to talk about something, don't you?"

Mrs. Foster sighed. She looked tired and a little scared. "It's hard. I shouldn't burden you like this. I brought you here to study."

Richard shrugged. "I'm your friend."

"Yes, and you know what? You're probably the only real gentleman in the entire building. I mean that."

Richard smiled. "What's on your mind?"

Taking a seat beside Richard, Mrs. Foster let out a long sigh. "Things are changing."

"They are," said Richard, nodding. (Taking Mrs. Foster's cue for a break, one of the girls—Jenna, he realized, spotting a telltale mole on her forearm—scooted behind and wrapped her arms around her shoulders, resting her head beside Mrs. Foster's.)

"Not for the better. Not for the greater good."

"You said that once," Richard said. "The day they enforced the new dress code. Remember?"

"Yes," said Mrs. Foster, her gaze suddenly distant. "I remember there used to be a humanity here. It was always hard, yes. The Garden is where you get sent if the government has nowhere else to put you, so naturally I never expected Shangri-la, but there was a sense of purpose. You didn't mind the sweat, the blood, the tears because you knew you were taking one for the team. I'm turning forty-seven this year, Richard. *Forty-seven*. They say wisdom comes with age, but you know how I feel these days? Like I've been the butt of a decades-long joke."

Richard frowned and thought of Juju only recently discovering the RFID tags

in his clothes.

"The worst part is, I know I'm putting my own desires first. I mean, I know it's hard. People get out of hand—the security team has a job to do, I know that—but sometimes I feel like the Garden is nothing more than a poorly-managed halfway house. A cheap labor camp in all but name. A prison, even. I mean, is it *really* necessary for the perimeter fence to be live? We've never had anyone attempt infiltration in twenty years. Too much desert all around us—and those bots are always monitoring the outlying area. There's security, and there's excess. God forbid one of the children should wander off and get electrocuted."

Mrs. Foster sighed, took hold of Jenna's hands, swinging them back and forth playfully. Richard wanted to say something to make her feel better, but the uncertainty he'd picked up earlier in the washroom was still with him. Whenever he thought of a comment, a response, a story he could tell, he found his mind looping back to the present, the inevitability that no matter what he did, the effect would only be temporary. Mrs. Foster's cluttered kitchen-classroom, crumpled worksheets, broken, worn-down pencils and nubbed erasers, Jenna clinging to this woman in lieu of her father—this was the present-tense. All other avenues of possibility led right back here.

"Juju talks about those kinds of things all the time," he said after a moment. "He says, 'Steel Garden is a thinly-veiled cover for the Sol Union's citizen babysitting program!'"

Mrs. Foster laughed in a serious sort of way. "I can imagine him saying that, and I'm inclined to agree. I *do* feel like I'm being babysat sometimes, like the whole of us are merely being kept here to do the Union's busywork...but then, it's nothing as bad as what our soldiers are going through on the front lines. They give them suicide pills, you know. Young men and women your age having to take their own lives for fear of winding up inside a Kur science lab. But there I go, upsetting the girls with my talk of gloom and doom. I really shouldn't watch so many videos. They'll drive me to the brink."

Megan had set her schoolwork down and attached herself to Mrs. Foster's free side; she was braiding her hair. "Mrs. Foster?" she asked.

"Yes, dearie?"

"Can I have some more lemonade?"

"Me too?" asked Jenna, also braiding Mrs. Foster's hair.

Mrs. Foster nodded and rose from her seat. "Of course. Richard?"

"No thanks," Richard replied. "I'm fine."

Taking the girls' glasses, Mrs. Foster went over to the counter, fetched more ice from the icebox. Richard watched her fill the glasses, and though she tried to be inconspicuous about it, he could tell she was taking inventory, counting the lemons, oranges, pineapples, and bananas that, come next week, would be gone.

"I'm going to talk to the landlord again," she said, returning to the table with the girls' drinks. "There's got to be something we can do about the food situation. In the meantime, we're going to have to ration. The children need proper nutrition, you too, Richard. I'm going to insist upon it. I don't want you going

hungry, you hear?"

"I tried one of the candy bars at lunchtime," Richard said, making a face. "I guess it filled me up—but it didn't taste very good."

"Hmf! And they expect us to throw a decent dinner party with candy bars and milkshakes?" Mrs. Foster shook her head. "I don't know what to do, Richard. I really don't."

Richard thought for a moment. Then, his face brightening: "Are they making the other buildings switch over to the new food plan, too?"

"I'm not sure," said Mrs. Foster. "Everyone has their own deal. Ours is, for one reason or another, no longer valid. And now, with the riot, I'll bet we've been flagged. Oh, what *are* we going to do about food?"

Pushing his chair back, Richard stood up and, though his schoolwork was only half finished, headed for the door.

"Where are you going?" asked Mrs. Foster.

"Over to building B," Richard replied.

# Chapter 12

Travel between dormitories was unrestricted, though under present circumstances Richard found himself in the midst of more than a few wary-looking soldiers in fatigues as he followed the sizzling-hot concrete strip that connected building A to building B. Each guard he passed appraised him with either a quizzical or disdainful look on his or her face, but otherwise Richard was left alone—proof that Parsons' idea of stepping up security had merely placed more bodies in uniform. Everyone was busy, but no one was really *doing* anything; the underlying sources for possible mayhem had been misaddressed, and more guards would only complicate, not deter.

Richard stepped along—his hands in his pockets, the sweat streaming down his face in large rivulets—and considered a good many things having to do with campus politics. He knew that building B's liaison (whose name was Joanne, though Richard had never met her face to face) was a decade and a half younger than Mrs. Foster, and that she was far more willing to "cooperate" with her superiors for her fellow tenants' amenities. Where Mrs. Foster offered clean habits, quiet, amiable residents in exchange for favors, Joanne promised "happy endings," in Juju's words, to anyone who got her what she wanted. There were quarrels, sometimes, noisy neighbors, people late for work, but it seemed as long as building B's matriarch was willing to trade sex for favors, there was no problem.

Building B's plaza was identical to building A's, and though the residents had situated themselves differently, the basics were the same. There was a water line in the center, showers, a washroom, and the obligatory group of residents (Alix's mother included) handling the wash. Alix was there, too; she smiled and jumped to her feet when she saw Richard.

Alix was dark-haired, slender, and one of the more forthright of Richard's acquaintances, as was evidenced by the way she dropped her work, ran across the plaza, and hugged him ferociously. The women watched the two of them with careful expressions, unspoken reminders: If he were anyone else, he'd have been tossed out on his ear long ago. However, since he *was* polite, well-mannered, and had not attempted to openly deflower Alix or any of the other campus girls, he was deemed acceptable—meaning an eye was still kept on him, but he was allowed to interact with Alix so long as it was in an appropriate manner.

"I'm *so* happy to see you!" Alix said.

Richard smiled, suppressing a grimace as the younger children came yipping at his heels, some of them trying to climb onto his shoulders.

"Can you give me a piggyback ride, Richard?" asked one.

"Did you see the spaceships, Richard?" asked another.

"Richard! Tell us a story!" demanded a third.

Alix sighed impatiently and stamped her foot on the ground. "Later, Bailey! Me and Richard have to talk right now."

The children covered their mouths with their hands and nudged each other conspiratorially.

"Ooh!" said one. "They're going to *talk*!"

"Kiss-kiss!"

Alix swatted the children out of the way and took Richard's hand, started leading him from the plaza.

"Alix!" her mother called, and fixed her with a stern look. "We have work to do."

"This will only take a minute, mother."

Richard followed Alix to the old laundry room, which had been abandoned for quite some time (but which rarely went unused). He sat with her on one of the washing machines and had barely opened his mouth to say something when suddenly she was in his arms, her head pressed tightly against his chest.

"Aw," he said, trying to lift her head gently. "I'm all sweaty."

"I don't care," Alix said, quivering slightly. "Just hold me."

Richard held her, stroked her hair, and realized something that took him by surprise: Alix loved him. And not just friend to friend. They'd made an agreement earlier in the year, boyfriend and girlfriend, with privileges—he should have seen it coming, for it had been a year of change. Certainly he'd noticed the increasing intensity of emotion Alix displayed whenever they got together like this, but it was only now that he seemed to feel it, too.

Somehow, a secret switch inside him had been turned on.

"Sorry," Alix said, lifting her head after a while. "You know I get like this whenever there's trouble."

"It's okay," Richard replied.

"What's the news?"

"Our building's on restriction."

"How sad!"

"Yeah. None of us is happy with how they're handling things over there. You heard about the riot?"

"Yeah."

"Well, they're putting us on a no-poop diet."

Alix giggled. "What's that?"

"No meat, no fruits or vegetables or anything. They're giving us Kiengiri nutrition bars and vitamin drinks instead. And they've got guards everywhere now—and the bots are always on. It's supposed to make us feel *safe*."

"Well, that's just plain ridiculous."

"*Dumb* is more like it," Richard snorted. "Everyone I know is against the changes."

"At least they're trying, I guess," Alix said. "I was so worried. When the ships

were flying overhead Friday night...you were all I could think about. The other girls said it was terrible for them too, not being able to check on their boyfriends."

Richard blushed. Down in the shelter, he'd been thinking of Gramma, Grampa, Mrs. Foster, the Hags—he should have been thinking of Alix, he realized. She'd thought of him.

He pecked her on the cheek; she reciprocated by kissing him on the mouth. This led to the obligatory make-out session, which lasted for several minutes.

During their first breather, Richard remembered his ulterior motive and asked, "Is building B still on the old food plan?"

"Yeah," Alix replied.

"Good, because I was wondering if maybe you could sneak me some veggies and fruits—for the little kids and for the old people."

Alix pinched him. "Is this why you came here today? To seduce me for food?"

"Hey, *you* were the first one to use tongues!" Richard exclaimed.

Alix laughed. "I'm kidding, Richard. Of course I'll give you something to bring back home." She smiled, then, and took his hand. "But will you give me something in return?"

"What, exactly?"

"Tell me a dirty story."

Richard's face reddened. He always felt guilty when Alix asked him that, and he shuddered to think what would happen if Gramma or Juju knew that his storytelling gift had, on numerous occasions, been used for masturbatory or amatory purposes—but Alix was his one and only girl. The way he figured it, *telling* her something naughty was far less scandalous than actually *doing* something naughty, though Alix, having received numerous detailed reports from her peers, had approached Richard with contraception tablets every now and again. However, her interest (and his alike) had been tentative, more curiosity than passion. She was young, and so was Richard, and while he was proud of the fact that he was the object of an achingly pretty girl's affections, he didn't think it was prudent to be consummating the deal just yet. Sex was what you did when you wanted a baby, and Richard didn't want a baby.

So he compromised. There was a story that Alix liked, one that he'd first told her several months ago and that he'd worked on steadily, adding fresh details each time they met. In it, Richard and Alix were marooned on a tropical island conveniently devoid of insects and dangerous animals. As Richard told his story, the laundry room wavered and became overgrown with lush jungle leafage, wood and concrete splintering, swallowed whole by a botanical paradise. Holding Alix's hand, Richard hopped off the washing machine, and the surrounding environment transformed completely. He lifted Alix onto the ground. There was a pond nearby, fed by a shallow waterfall and deep enough to swim in. Alix giggled and dove in first. Richard followed and surfaced beside her, slicking back his hair as he treaded cool, clear water.

"You always give me huge boobs in your stories!" Alix complained, though she didn't seem to be overtly concerned.

Richard embraced her. "They seem fine to me."

Alix splashed him playfully, wriggling from his grasp and playing hard-to-get, swimming from bank to bank until at last Richard captured her in a sandy cove. There, they did the things lovers do, a quantum couple merely holding hands in one world, but melding completely in another. Afterward, they cuddled together in the shade of an ample cycad.

"It's so real," Alix said, taking a handful of moistened grass in her hand. "Not like the dried-up weeds we have in the Garden. I think you get better every time we're together."

Richard held her for a while longer, letting his ego bask in her attention. Then he blew her a kiss, at which point the paradise-world crossfaded back into the hot, dusty laundry room where he was himself again (Alix too), awkward, slightly embarrassed, pulse still thundering, cheeks flushed.

"I should get back before my mother calls security," Alix said, slipping from the washing machine.

"Yeah," agreed Richard. He accompanied Alix to the entrance. "Will you meet me here again tonight? For the food?"

"Sure," Alix said. "What do you want?"

"Whatever you think is good. Surprise me. Midnight—the witching hour."

"The witching hour."

"Remember not to wear your coveralls."

"I thought this was going to be strictly business."

"It is. I just don't want you being tracked by the bots."

"I was *kidding*. I know about the bots."

"Good." Richard kissed Alix on the cheek. "Don't be late."

"I won't," Alix said.

* * *

That night, while waiting for Gramma and Grampa to settle in, Richard lay in his bed and dreamed of the food truck riot over and over. In every instance, he was forthright, daring enough that he would climb onto the distribution table and do a silly dance, tell a funny story, wave his hand at the crowd and have them laughing and cheering instead of screaming and shouting in a mad rush of pent-up frustration. Each time around he would wake up with a terrible feeling of missed opportunity. Shortly before midnight, he finally slipped from his cot and crept through his grandparents' darkened apartment. He sneaked a peek out the front window and saw a fresh installment of guards pacing to and fro (six of them: two in the plaza, and the remaining four stepping along the walkways). It was such a ridiculous sight that Richard almost laughed out loud. What were the soldiers guarding? The washroom? The showers? Did they think the campus was susceptible to grungy Kur renegades out to do their laundry?

Receding into the kitchen nook, Richard took a fresh garbage bag from the cupboard. Wadding it tightly in his hand, he padded across the living room and to

the rear window. He climbed outside without a sound and crept through the dreary midnight. He stuck close to the route he and Juju had taken Friday morning, beyond the reach of the perimeter fence security phosphors but far enough from the dormitory building that anyone peeking outside would hopefully miss Richard's lithe form crawling between the bushes. If he thought he was in danger of being spotted by a flesh and blood sentry, he crouched behind a shrub or flattened himself against the ground—he pretended he was playing a game, and even kept score in his head. Richard, the Creepy Kur, infiltrating the Steel Garden campus in order to make a rendezvous with the human female known as Alix Campos.

He made it to building B's laundry room without incident (though he was quite sweaty, and covered from head to toe with clumps of sand and dust). Alix was waiting for him inside, and she'd brought with her a sizable bag of goodies, which she'd propped on one of the machines.

"From my parents' stash," she said, helping to transfer the produce into Richard's bag. "I'll explain to them tomorrow, if they ask."

"Thanks," Richard said. "I can just imagine the looks on everyone's face when they see all this!"

Alix nodded. "How are you going to distribute it?"

Richard thought for a moment. As attractive as it would be to go door to door, leaving care packages on everyone's welcome mats, there were too many guards up and about—and besides, the summer heat would probably spoil the food before it had a chance to be properly stored. "I'll keep it in my icebox. Then, tomorrow after work, I'll bring it to Mrs. Foster's roof. We always have get-togethers up there while we wash our clothes—it'll be the perfect surprise to cheer everyone up."

Stuffing the last of the fruit into his bag, Richard cinched the drawstring, kissed Alix on the cheek, and started to leave. To his surprise, Alix stepped along with him and slipped her hand into his.

"What are you doing?" he asked.

"I'm walking you home," Alix replied.

"Why?"

"Because it breaks the rules."

"This is serious business," Richard said, though he had to admit it *was* just the slightest bit exciting to be up and about past his bedtime. "If your parents catch you missing from your bed—"

But it wasn't as easy as that. Before he could voice any further concerns, Alix had let him go and run off northward along building B's outskirts. When he caught up to her, she was crouching at the southern edge of the sand field separating her building from Richard's.

"This is something like what Robin Hood would do," Alix whispered, slightly out of breath, smiling ear to ear.

"Who?" asked Richard.

"*Robin Hood*, silly. He steals from the rich and gives to the poor."

Richard chuckled. "Except no one here is rich." He looked out across the field;

there were a pair of guards strolling along the walkway. They weren't necessarily keen-looking, but they were there nonetheless, rifles and all. "You really should get back home."

"No way," Alix whispered, muscles tightened, legs braced and ready to spring into action at a moment's notice.

Richard reached for her, but she was once again dodging deftly out of the way, all wild-eyes and unbridled hair as she darted across the sandy divide. A quick glance in the direction of the walkway revealed the guards were looking the other way—but there was no guarantee that at any second they wouldn't turn around and see two mischievous residents out past curfew and dancing around like heathens.

Training his eyes on Alix once again, Richard saw that she'd made it safely to a large patch of creosotes about a third of the way across the field and was now beckoning for him to join her. As cautious as Richard was about the whole situation, there really wasn't any other course of action to be taken, and so, hefting the bag of produce in his arms, he launched himself across the sand, *step-step-step*, through hot and humid shadows, summertime sweat matting his hair and stinging his eyes as he stumbled into the creosote haven. He fell into Alix's arms, giggling and panting and so swept up in a rush of adrenaline and latent hormones that he allowed his attention to focus itself entirely on Alix when he should have been watching for the two guards, who were suddenly shouting and shining their lights in Richard and Alix's direction—

"Hey, you!" one of them called.

Alix exploded from Richard's embrace, running at catch-me-if-you-can velocity across the sand field. Richard blinked and found himself running after her. He was so charged up that he couldn't have stopped even if he'd wanted to. His legs flexed hard, his steps widening as he ran after Alix, laughing out loud even as he heard the sound of the guards' pursuit, the shouts of warning, the click of a rifle being fired —

—the charge hit Richard square in the back. He went tumbling down onto the ground face-first, where he lay trembling and twitching and trying to work his jaw around a mouthful of sand. Somewhere nearby, Alix screamed as she too was incapacitated. Richard tried to move, but his limbs refused to cooperate. Bright lights, rough hands, sharp handcuffs; he was rolled onto his side by one of the guards, who, to Richard, was nothing more than a towering silhouette.

"Damn," the soldier said. "He's bleeding."

"Get him to the infirmary," said the other. "Parsons won't like blood on his office chairs."

Richard groaned as he was hauled to his feet.

He was in deep trouble.

# Chapter 13

It took a good twenty minutes for Richard's system to level itself. During the interim, both he and Alix were cleaned up, properly bandaged, dressed in fresh coveralls, and led to Chief Parsons' office. The chief himself looked none too happy about being woke at such an hour. He sat at his desk and toyed with an orange (taken from Richard's garbage bag), rolling it back and forth between his hands. He looked first at Alix, then at Richard.

"Mr. Doroschenko," he said. "We meet again."

Richard nodded, recalling the warehouse pep talk. "I'm really not like this," he wanted to say. "I don't usually go around causing trouble in the middle of the night—please don't erase my memory." In actuality, he merely sat still, stared fixedly at the desktop as he awaited his sentencing.

"You're the lad who's turning twenty-one soon. This weekend, right?"

Richard nodded.

"You must be excited." Parsons paused and paid Alix another glance. "I bring this up because more than one rule has been broken tonight. Out past curfew, unsupervised, and, well, what sorts of possibilities are there for a young couple under such circumstances? Tell me, Richard, have your parents—wait, you live with your grandparents, correct?"

Richard nodded again.

"Ah, yes. And have your grandparents ever talked with you about what's proper and what's improper concerning a young man's relationship with a lady?"

Richard wrestled with his tongue, the wound on his forehead throbbing. Gramma had never instructed him as such; neither had Grampa. In fact, Richard hadn't the slightest idea there was any sort instruction available for guys and girls who fancied each other. Either a girl liked you and gave you privileges, or she didn't. "No...sir."

"Well," said Parsons, "it's not my place to instruct you in this area, but needless to say, you and your little girlfriend have caused a bit of trouble, and not just for yourselves, but for all the other residents of your respective dormitories. Do you know what a curfew is?"

"Yes," said Richard.

Alix nodded, caught halfway between quiet devastation and uncontrollable tears.

Parsons went on: "It's known and accepted that after sundown, residents should keep within the boundaries of their own buildings. The curfew has never been a hard rule because people have always followed the rules, but now...now I'm

afraid the landlord will want to make some changes to the way things are run around here." He leaned back in his chair, stretching his arms. "There are Kur rodents scurrying about planetside. Did you know that?"

Richard shook his head, felt his pulse quicken. Oh, he'd heard stories, hearsay—but Earth was supposed to be *safe*, the Kur outside, humans and Kiengiri in—

"Oh, yes. Just because you haven't seen the evidence with your own eyes doesn't mean the Kur don't exist and aren't here right now, plotting and planning in the shadows. The Kiengiri may be our allies, our best friends in this galactic mess we've found ourselves in, but even they aren't infallible. Enemy soldiers slip through the cracks, sometimes on purpose, sometimes not. Regardless, the Kur are psychologically fatal to humans. Their physical appearance is so grotesque that to gaze upon one in shadow is to go mad—and in broad daylight...well, far be it for me to dispense with the scary stories before bedtime, but we are at war. Did you know that almost half of the Garden's supply transports never make it here? Our secluded location is our protection, but it's also our bane, because any enemies who are hardy enough to survive in this desert wasteland are enemies we certainly don't want launching coordinated attacks on our men and women, military *and* civilian.

"Security is serious business. It's my job to make sure our campus is secure, but you must understand what that entails. My men have been trained for hand-to-hand combat with the Kur, and because they know what they're up against, physically *and* psychologically, their reactions can be swift and violent." Parsons leaned forward and tapped Richard's bandage. "In a moment of split-second reaction, you might be torn to shreds before anyone realizes you're just a human lad, one of our own."

Richard frowned and tried not to wince. His head wound ached (the nano medics hadn't yet finished their work, and so he was still fairly tender). On the way to Parsons' office, he'd imagined himself behaving in a more forthright fashion and taking on the situation with Juju-caliber wit and charm. Now, however, he was sore, tired—wilted like a dying plant. He wished he'd been firmer with Alix; he wished she'd simply stayed home and not run headlong into things as if it were all a game (but he had played his own game on the way to her dormitory as well, hadn't he?). His hormones had overwhelmed his better judgment; he'd delighted in the naughtiness—Alix and himself hadn't merely been huddled together in the laundry room during a make-out session, they'd been out in the open, like a pair of shameless carousers.

It was going to cost them.

After a few minutes of silent suffering, there was a knock at the door, and Gramma was escorted into the office. She took a seat, paying Richard (and Alix) an unreadable glance, and Parsons launched into an encore lecture about campus rules, Sol Union politics, and proactive parenting methods.

Alix's parents, who arrived halfway through the speech, were spared the full force of Parsons' meticulous scolding. Half-listening, Mrs. Campos coddled Alix while Mr. Campos merely gazed straight and steady at Richard, who knew that

Mr. Campos was fuming. He knew the man was thinking up all kinds of scandalous excuses a shameless brute would use to lure his daughter out into the night, and he knew he was no longer within the Campos family's circle of trust.

Parsons eventually dismissed everyone. As Richard and Alix hadn't done anything in the way of property damage, they were let off with a warning. Their produce was confiscated, however.

Gramma took Richard's hand and led him from the office, out into the hot and humid night. Together they walked in silence toward their dormitory, Richard only once glancing over his shoulder to see Alix and her parents, accompanied by a pair of guards, stepping along in the opposite direction, heading home.

Back in their apartment, Richard stood in the center of the living room and awaited his scolding. Gramma closed and locked the door; she looked tired—too tired, apparently, to do anything more than nod at him as she wiped a bit of perspiration from her forehead.

"You've grown up, haven't you?" was all she said before turning away and disappearing through the bedroom doorway.

Richard peeled the bandage from his forehead and threw it in the trash. After a few minutes' pacing back and forth in the darkened kitchen nook, he went into the bedroom and lay on his cot. He stared up at the ceiling and replayed the morning's events in his mind. Embarking on his journey, his view of campus security had been whimsical, almost comical—that wasn't the case now. Something had changed, externally and internally. The campus was no longer home, the darkness no longer safe.

He closed his eyes, tossed and turned during a fitful sleep. Eventually dawn broke and it was time to go to work.

# Chapter 14

At lunchtime on Wednesday, Richard, tired and lethargic, shuffled into the lunch yard and deposited himself beside Juju on their usual bench.

"Jesus, kid," said Juju, wiping a smear of nutritional paste from his upper lip. "You look like hell. Out drinking all night?"

"There's no alcohol allowed on campus," Richard replied in a flat monotone.

Juju scowled. "Nice to see last night's fiasco hasn't dulled your normally dry sense of humor."

Richard grimaced. "Have the Hags already told everyone?"

"Their eyes see all—but it's not them I'm worried about, it's you."

"I'm fine. A little tired."

"Just please tell me you've been using protection."

"Protection?" Richard asked, aghast.

"Contraception tablets, spermicidal cream, an old-school condom, at the very least."

Richard blushed. "Is *that* what everyone thinks we were doing?" He should have known. Even now, when he glanced over at Lucas and Grabs' bench, they winked at him and made thrusting motions with their pelvises before giving him a thumbs up.

Juju shrugged. "Well?"

"We weren't doing anything," Richard insisted. "Well, we *were*, but it wasn't *that*."

"Do tell," Juju said, noticeably relieved.

Richard sighed, related the details concerning his late-night excursion with Alix.

"Robin Hood, huh?" Juju chuckled afterward.

"That's what Alix said." Richard thought of her now, wondered how badly she'd been scolded once her parents had gotten her home.

"Well," said Juju, "it was a noble thing of you to do, even if it's had the unfortunate side-effect of the Hags embellishing your reputation as a sex god."

"I never touched her," Richard said. "Alix, I mean. We've, uh, kissed and stuff, but we've never *done it*. We don't want to be irresponsible."

"Smarter words have never been said."

"I tell her dirty stories instead."

"Dirty stories?" Juju raised an eyebrow.

"Sure."

"For shame, Richard."

"But we never touch each other—at least, not down there, and not in the real world. So there's no way I can get her pregnant unless I—"

Juju groaned, cutting Richard off with a wave of his hand. "Okay. Enough."

"Sorry," Richard said, and sighed. He opened his lunchbox, took out his souped-up nutritional candy bar, his vitamin milkshake, and started eating. The meal was unsatisfying: the nutrition bar was too grainy, the faux-yogurt coating too sweet, the drink too rich. When he was through, he was actually thirstier than he'd been a moment ago.

Juju handed him his water bottle. "Water," he said. "There's no substitute, whatever Sigler's nutritionists say."

Richard drank deeply, wiped his mouth on the back of his hand, and handed the bottle back to Juju.

"Thanks for leaving me some," he grumbled in a sarcastic tone. Richard apologized, offered to refill the bottle, but Juju merely waved his hand and scowled. "I'd probably sweat it all out by next shift, the way the temperature's going today. I'll get more on the way inside."

With a nod, Richard leaned back slightly and squinted through the fence. It was hot enough that the ground wavered, almost liquid-like. Richard's coveralls were mottled with patches of sweat; his deodorant was on the verge of expiring. It made him think of what Parsons had said earlier in his office, about hardy aliens surviving the elements and causing trouble.

"Juju?" Richard asked.

"Yes?"

"Is it true there are Kur hiding in the desert?"

"Of course," said Juju. "There's a war going on. Various races and species getting in each other's business, and so forth."

"But I thought they did all that out in space. I mean, we have a skirmish every now and then when the fighters accidentally fall into sub-orbit, but it's not supposed to be a ground war, is it?"

Juju spat. "The President tells us we're secure—but then, the President will say whatever he has to say to make us happy, to keep us quietly slaving away. Truth is, it's a big universe—you can't be one-hundred percent sure about anything."

Richard felt himself shiver despite the heat. "You were lucky you didn't see any Kur when you ran away, then."

"I would have made a great example if I *had* run into a Kur or two!" Juju laughed. "The Kiengiri don't *need* us. We've made ourselves useful, given every excuse for them to keep us around as the stewards of Earth, but beyond that we're a nuisance, aren't we? We're a tolerated species—animals, pets. They certainly don't need a planetary playpen full of foul-tempered humans arguing with one another. If we can't take care of our own enough to keep ourselves out of the way, I'm sure they can wipe us out with the push of a button. And since our beloved president lives outside of Sol, what does he care if us poor lower-class slobs lose a head or two while running around in the desert like maniacs? We're just so much real estate. Expendable. Replaceable."

Richard glowered at Juju and reminded himself to talk to Mrs. Foster the next time he needed a comforting perspective.

"What do you want me to say?" Juju asked, spreading his arms. "You know better than anyone else the futility in idle comforts—but if comfort's what you want, then take heart: to date, I have never seen a Kur soldier face to face. So, I suppose the Kiengiri must care *something* for us. Unless it's all a farce—then all bets are off."

"A farce? You mean, just to keep us working here? Really?"

Juju put his hand on Richard's shoulder. "You, my friend, are in serious need of a nap."

"Answer the question, Juju," Richard said, trying not to let the unexpected something that had crept into his thoughts spark his temper.

"I think," said Juju, "there are many reasons to want cheap labor. Here or in the city, they're not going to tell us the truth all the time. I'm almost certain we're being lied to, but I don't think our government is devious enough to have cooked up an entire alien mythology." He let go of Richard. "What's got you thinking things like this anyway?"

"I don't know," Richard replied. "I guess I'm just tired. I think strange things when that happens."

"Don't we all."

The work bell's insistent drone reverberated across the yard.

Juju stood, stretched. "Did I mention you look like hell?"

"Yes, Juju."

"You should take the rest of the day off. Feign heat stroke or something."

"I'm fine," Richard said. "Really."

He closed his lunchbox and headed back inside.

* * *

At ten after five, Richard, face swollen, limbs leaden, stumbled into the plaza for his shower. There were three dozen workers waiting for the sprays. Neighbors smiled wearily and said hello to him, but he hardly heard them as he slowly peeled off his clothes and appropriated the nearest spray, when it was free. The water was borderline hot; he soaped up, scrubbed the day's sweat from his skin, head to toe. As he rinsed his hair, he leaned back, cracked open his eyelids and gazed up into the sky, which the sun was just starting to set ablaze as it sank slowly in the west. The celestial plane was unmarred, unscratched, any signs of the battle being fought above washed out by the sun's incessant ministrations.

Shutting off the spray, Richard stepped out of the way and let the next person go. All around, the late afternoon heat radiated off everyone's bodies. Richard grabbed his things and moved through the crowd, a slight breeze kicking up and cooling him off—but then the breeze was gone and it was all hot, still air, the smell of other people's sweat, the sounds of their yawns. Showering in one of Steel Garden's plazas made one wonder why the Kur were so adamant about acquiring

the Earth in their collection of planets. Hot, tired, miserable Earth. If humanity had been wiped out, Richard wondered, would it be Kur men and women standing where he was and sweating bullets, wishing it was night already?

The Doroschenkos' apartment offered little respite. Richard's intention was to check in on Gramma and Grampa before going up to the roof for a nap, but he'd barely gotten dressed and was fetching a glass of water from the keg when he suddenly heard a ruckus in the plaza, voices agitated, booted feet shuffling about—

—a loud knock on the Doroschenkos' front door.

Richard glanced questioningly at Gramma before answering it.

It was an armed soldier.

"Outside, son," the soldier said, hauling him forward and setting him against the wall.

Glancing to and fro, Richard saw that the other residents (those who weren't already in the plaza waiting for the showers) were being removed from their apartments as well and being made to stand in a line outside their front doors as a small fleet of soldiers rummaged about within. Sometimes in pairs or groups of three or four, they emerged from the dormitories bearing armfuls of personal belongings, which they deposited in plastic bins, ready to be trucked off.

"What's going on, Richard?" Gramma asked, holding onto Grampa and trying to keep him sedate as a soldier set her beside Richard.

"I don't know." Richard shook his head, dazed by it all. There were soldiers everywhere, and they were armed to the teeth as they rounded up every last resident. A good many people were distraught, a few outraged.

Juju was one of the louder of those who'd been expelled from their apartments. He cursed and spat and presented his middle finger numerous times as a pair of guards told him to stand quietly against the wall with his arms and legs apart.

"Invasion of privacy!" he yelled. "Prison mentality!"

Mrs. Foster, several more doors down, was less resistant physically, but no less determined to find a resolution to the situation:

"I've spoken with Parsons' office at great length about this sort of thing," she said, "and whether or not it's for our protection, you simply cannot go around ejecting everyone from their homes on a whim. This is *not* a prison camp!"

Much to Richard's surprise, the guard Mrs. Foster was talking to placed a hand over her mouth and growled something like, "Stop talking, ma'am." At least, that's what Richard thought he said; there was so much noise now—neighbors talking, crying, yelling—he couldn't discern any one conversation clearly.

In the center of the plaza, the garbage bins were adding up, and Richard was surprised by the sorts of items being confiscated from people's homes: alcohol, cigarettes, pornographic magazines, little packages of white powder, canned food —the guards were clearing out everyone's stashes.

The Doroschenkos appeared to be among the least offensive. After only a few minutes, a pair of soldiers exited their apartment and had nothing to toss into the garbage bins—well, almost nothing. Gramma and Grampa's various medications seemed to have been deemed a no-no.

"Wait," Richard said, seeing the pill bottles in the soldiers' hands. He grabbed one of the men by the shoulder. "Those are for my grandparents."

"Richard," Gramma began, trying to hold him back. "Let it be—"

"They *need* those!" Richard insisted.

The soldier scowled at Richard, held up the medication bottles as his partner restrained Richard by the wrists. "Contraband."

Richard squirmed. "But they're pharmaceuticals! My grandmother has a heart condition, and my grandfather—"

"Ma'am," said the soldier, addressing Gramma, "Please restrain your grandson."

"Richard," Gramma repeated quietly. "*Let it be*."

"No!" Richard exclaimed, borderline frantic. "They're taking everything away —cigarettes and booze, that's one thing, but you and Grampa need your meds!"

The soldier grabbed Richard by the shoulders and pushed him back against the wall. "Restrain your grandson, ma'am!"

"Hey, easy with the kid!" Juju called out.

Richard looked in Juju's direction, saw one of the guards hitting him with his baton. Caught off guard, Juju stumbled back a step, shot Richard a warning glance.

Again, Gramma said, "Let it be, Richard."

The plaza quieted. Now it was the soldiers' noise that prevailed as they continued with their work—and they didn't bother to camouflage their disdain for Steel Garden and its residents.

One particular conversation caught Richard's attention as two guards carried one of the full garbage bins past the Doroschenkos' doorstep:

"...they're all the same, these campus grunts. Eat, drink, crap, and bang when they're not sleeping in a pile of their own filth. They can't help themselves. It's the slum mentalities they bring with them from the cities..."

A bitter taste collected at the back of Richard's throat. He wanted to rush into the midst of the security brigade and shout out loud for the soldiers to leave his neighbors alone. He wanted to tell them that Steel Garden's residents were good, kind, hard-working people, but his tongue was caught in his mouth, his body frozen in disbelief, for even he couldn't deny what he saw filling the garbage bins. The sheer amount of illicit material was mind-boggling. He'd had no idea his fellow tenants had been hiding so *much*. Hallucinogenic drugs, erotic toys, sharp knives, personal firearms. In one corner of the plaza, a man and a teenage girl, their hair mussed, their cheeks flushed, held their heads in shame as they were handcuffed and led away (their nudity not so extraordinary as the fact that they'd been found together in the man's apartment). They were Richard's neighbors, his people, yes, but caught doing *that*...Richard found himself burning with resentment.

He hadn't the slightest clue who his neighbors were.

"Don't fret, Richard."

Richard sighed, slumped his shoulders—almost didn't realize it was his grandfather who'd spoken. He turned around to face the man, and saw the most

incredibly coherent expression on his face.

"What, sir?" Richard rasped, his voice caught deep in his throat.

Grampa smiled. "I may not make a lot of noise these days, but I can still listen. I hear the stories you tell, Richard. I remember them all."

"I don't think this is a good time for stories, Grampa."

"Why not?" Grampa squatted slightly, broadened his smile. "After all, these military men are telling their own sort of story, aren't they? But no one seems to like the way it's being told. Maybe you can do something about that."

Richard got the message. Licking his lips, he thought for a moment, then, slowly shifting his gaze from Grampa to the plaza, he said, "It happened all of the sudden. One moment I was standing there with my grandparents, and the next... everything froze."

The soldier who'd remained at the Doroschenkos' side started to face Richard, but his motions were blurred, lagging. The rest of the plaza was slowing down, too.

"Everything froze...everything froze," Richard repeated under his breath, reminding himself that if he could wrap his neighbors in a virtual world during story time, he could create the same effect here and now.

If he tried.

He continued talking to no one in particular:

"I couldn't believe my eyes. Time in the Garden had become liquid, and the liquid was rapidly becoming viscous, honey-like, solidifying. Everyone and everything became suspended like insects in amber. Well, everyone but me, that is. Somehow I'd been completely unaffected by the phenomenon."

Richard blinked once and the plaza was motionless, reality obeying his every word. The soldier before him was half turned around, mouth hanging open, eyes unblinking. Richard waved his hand back and forth before the man's face, and was delighted when he got no response.

"My first thought," Richard said stepping off the breezeway and into the plaza, "was that maybe this was a new kind of Kur weapon designed to freeze us poor saps and rearrange our world in the blink of an eye. Maybe this was a test run—or maybe it was just a fluke, a burp in the fabric of space and time. I didn't wait for answers, though. This was an opportunity to take matters into my own hands. What would I do with my boon? Steal the guards' weapons and hide them in the junkyard? Return everyone's belongings and fill the garbage bins with sand? Get a closeup look at the shapely woman who'd been frozen while bending over to get dressed?" Richard moved toward the garbage bins. "I didn't know how much time —or non-time, as the case may have been—I had, so I bypassed all the obvious choices and went right to the garbage bin where I'd seen the guard toss Gramma and Grampa's meds. I hopped inside and started digging."

As Richard narrated himself, he searched the bin, ignoring the heat, his fatigue —the steady burn of betrayal by his neighbors' various secret indulgences, now exposed—until he found his prize.

"Meds in hand, I quickly jumped out of the garbage bin and made my way back to where my grandparents were standing. There, I waited for time to reanimate

itself. It only took a moment; slowly, lazily, motion was brought back to the plaza, until at last time was as it should have been. Well, as close as could be, for even though everything was physically and chronologically back to normal, people were in a daze, aware that something had just happened, but unable to put their fingers on exactly what it was that had their neck hairs bristling."

Gramma blinked, frowned curiously. "What was that?"

"What was what?" asked Richard, innocently.

"I think...I think the heat's getting to me."

The guard who'd been roughing Richard up now stepped back and glanced around the plaza, his attention trying to focus itself on whatever had caused his senses to hiccup. Across the way, Juju was holding his forehead and looking thoroughly spooked. Everyone else was likewise slightly out-of-step, off-balance.

Richard withheld a smile and pressed the prescription bottles into Gramma's hands. "Hide these."

Gramma snagged a glimpse at Richard's hands. She seemed confused, but didn't miss a beat as she hid the meds in the breast pocket of her coveralls.

Grampa chuckled triumphantly.

# Chapter 15

Mrs. Foster's abode was a somber affair that evening. Richard alighted on the rooftop and found a fraction of the usual residents present: Mrs. Foster, the Hags, the Petersons, two of the laundry girls, Nina and Karla—the people who hadn't been embarrassed beyond belief by having their deepest, darkest secrets aired out during the raid.

No one knew what to do or say. The food truck riot had been bad, but tonight's raid had affected everyone personally. Whatever opinions were held by his neighbors, Richard knew that from this point forward, he would be unable to feel at home in his grandparents' apartment. Steel Garden had become one big guardhouse.

Juju had been right all along.

The laundry girls, cut down to half capacity, worked quietly at their basins. Richard handed Nina his work clothes, and even managed a wan smile, though he knew there would be no good cheer this night.

Mrs. Foster was talking with the Hags in a hushed manner. She seemed to have aged ten years overnight, her hair not so shiny, the skin of her face not so tight. Richard paid her a brief glance and knew she was in the middle of something private, so he found a spot a little ways off where the concrete was cool and lay curled up on his side next to the potted ferns. Half a minute later, his exhaustion got the better of him and he drifted off into a light sleep, his brain refusing to offer up any dreams, but equally adamant against full consciousness for more than ten minutes here, ten minutes there. Around him, the rooftop slipped into evening's shade in quick succession; motion was played out—the laundry girls washing and talking, Jenna or Megan or Squirt pattering here or there during quiet games of hide-and-seek—between periods of mental white noise during which Richard's mind replayed the various events recorded during his day.

At some point shortly after sunset, Richard heard Mrs. Foster and the Hags talking about him in soft voices:

"Look at him," said Mrs. Foster, "passed out on the floor like that. Poor boy. He was so sweet to do what he did."

Magda: "So, the lad wasn't merely depositing his DNA in that girl from building B?"

"Don't be vulgar, now," Welma said. "He's old enough to be making those sorts of decisions anyway—but I suspect this time our messenger has given us biased information."

Eudora sniffed. "I'm not surprised, seeing as how it was Squirt who provided us

with the preliminary details. As useful as he is in a pinch, he *is* both young and male—the finer details often get lost in translation."

The women chuckled, and were silent for a while. Or maybe Richard drifted off again, because suddenly he caught Mrs. Foster in mid-sentence:

"...Newbie is his campus name."

"The missing night watchman?" asked Magda.

"Yes. When I spoke to Parsons, he said they were still looking for him."

"Such a softie," said Welma. "He was never meant for military work, much less the Garden. Too frail. He was always gnawing at his fingernails, one step away from a nervous breakdown. Even Lips couldn't loosen his coil."

Mrs. Foster: "He's done us all in. The raid was Sigler's idea—kill two birds with one stone."

"Supposedly," said Magda, "they were looking for Newbie when the soldiers raided our apartments."

"I don't buy that," said Eudora. "You saw what they were doing, how they went about it. Parsons probably filed his report about Richard and Alix, and when the landlord read it, the whole Steel Garden administration had a hissy fit. So they sent their little soldier-men in to do a bit of housecleaning. A show of power."

"Turned up some dirt, too. Did you see Gerard and that girl together?"

Welma sighed. "Lord, yes."

"That was a scandal even *we* didn't know about," said Magda.

"No wonder the outside world thinks ill of us," Eudora said. "Look what we've been hiding inside our walls, underneath our floorboards, between the bedclothes."

"You think that would explain the new guards' sour attitude?"

"Certainly," Mrs. Foster said. "I feel violated, and not just by the guards. I trusted my fellow tenants, gave them the benefit of the doubt. I thought the honor system was actually *working* for us. Now I find that all along I've been assuring the landlord that my building is clean and respectable when behind my back people are breaking every rule imaginable..."

Richard heard Mrs. Foster hiccup a couple of times, and he knew she was crying. His instinct was to go to her, to wrap his arms around her and offer all the comfort he could muster, but his body was still half asleep, his eyelids still refusing to open themselves more than a sliver.

So he continued to listen; his mind recorded.

"Poor, sweet Richard," Mrs. Foster said after she'd settled herself. "Look at him. Out like a light. I don't have the heart to wake him when it's time for everyone to go home."

There was a moment of silence, broken by the sound of bare feet against the floor—the Peterson girls chasing Squirt past the ferns. Their laughter faded into the background, and Richard heard Welma speaking softly.

She asked, "What do you suppose his grandparents are going to do about their meds?"

"I don't know," replied Mrs. Foster. "I don't like to think what the landlord has

in mind when he decides to cut our veterans off like that. It makes me wonder. They say it's illegal to outright *dispose* of our retirees, but to force them off their medication...what possible outcome is there other than the obvious? Just because they don't take a rifle to those poor folks' heads doesn't mean they're not killing them!"

Richard flinched in his semiconscious state, as much from the elevation of Mrs. Foster's voice as from the disturbing imagery her words had inspired.

"Shh," Magda whispered. "You'll wake him."

Mrs. Foster shifted so that her words didn't carry so well, and Richard let himself recede just a bit. On the periphery of things, it was almost like floating bodiless beside the Hags' table, seeing Mrs. Foster in his mind's eye as she sat slumped in her chair. He knew what she was feeling, except for her it was worse. He was only recovering from one bad day; she was trying to fend off twenty years. Twenty years believing in her cause and in her friends, and now it had all been tossed out with the trash.

Something in his gut twisted. He veered his thoughts away, let himself sink down into the deep dark, actually managed a few hours' worth of quality sleep before an unexpected smell tickled his nostrils. It was a fragrant mix of body wash, shampoo, subtle perfume—

—Lips.

Richard sat up, rubbed his eyes as Lips, having stripped down to bra and panties, stepped onto the roof with coveralls in hand.

Smiling in a bored sort of way, she asked, "I hear you folks hold a nightly soirée up here?"

Richard heard Mrs. Foster groan distastefully. Lips had, at one time, been considered an asset in building A's bargaining scheme. In her late twenties, full-breasted and lithe, and always doused in a variety of perfumes and body sprays to mask the smell of business, she was what the Hags often referred to as "the original sin." She had an affinity for the oral arts, and was apparently quite popular with the guards. Everyone knew it, most disapproved openly of the "services" she provided, and yet somehow she ran a lucrative business.

Except for tonight, it seemed.

"Don't you have somewhere you should be?" asked Mrs. Foster, her tone frigid.

Lips shrugged—a luxurious movement of her shoulder that made her breasts bounce alluringly. "Tonight's one of those nights. No one's in the mood after what happened earlier."

Richard glanced across the way and saw Chad hiding his face behind a magazine—as if he had reason to be embarrassed by Lips' presence.

No, thought Richard. Not Chad, not with two daughters, to just leave them alone and go off in the middle of the night and share a bed with *her*...

Karla grudgingly took Lips' coveralls.

Mrs. Foster, noticing that Richard had awakened, shot him an exasperated glance.

This contrasted against Lips' confidence and self-assuredness as she watched

him, smiling...appraising. He supposed he should have been flattered, but instead he felt an inexplicable urge to tell Lips off.

"Why so uptight?" Lips asked, and walked over to where Mrs. Foster was standing. Face to face. The lioness and the leopard, Richard thought.

And that's when it clicked, the reason, Richard knew, why Mrs. Foster loathed Lips, why *he* now hated Lips as well and wanted her off the roof as soon as possible: She was the ultimate personification of what the guards had been discussing earlier during the raid. Men left their wives, their children, they skipped out on their jobs just to spend a few hours a week with this woman. She, in turn, made a living off the insatiable lusts of others, not actually *working* in Steel Garden's warehouse at all but subsisting on the labor of others too inebriated by their own libidos to know any better. Or, they *did* know better and didn't care.

Richard folded his arms and imitated Mrs. Foster's scowl.

Mrs. Foster, to her credit, tried her best to handle the situation with grace, without breaking her number one rule: No one shall be turned away. Even though there was a shortage, she fetched Lips a glass of lemonade. Lips took a long, flamboyant sip, and Richard thought for a moment that she might retreat, leave in peace. Instead she glided over to the bigscreen, sat cross-legged on the rug and started fiddling with the remote. After several failed attempts to load a video, she turned and faced Richard, who happened to be standing closest.

"Hey," she said, smiling. "Can you help me?"

Despite a murderous look from Mrs. Foster (and a disdainful flurry of snorts from the Hags), Richard approached Lips, swallowed and knelt on the rug. "What's the matter?"

"This thing is *ancient*," Lips said, pouting. "How do you play a video?"

"Well," Richard said, scooting in front of the screen and taking the remote, "there are the main categories, here. You have to choose one, and then a bunch of sub-categories come up, here. You can do a keyword search, or you can just scroll down the list of offerings like this. When you find something you like, you have to choose the bit rate. That's what this little scale is for. A lower bit rate will load the video quicker, but the picture quality will suck. A higher bit rate takes longer to download, but the quality is much better. Lastly, you click 'Play' and the video will be downloaded for you."

"Oh, now I get it!" Lips patted Richard on the back, moving her hand downward and not letting go until she'd navigated the swell of his butt with her palm. "Thank you so much."

Richard got to his feet and moved himself several steps away from the rug—out of reach, for he knew in close proximity Lips was corruption, total and absolute, and it made him furious that, as she'd caressed him, he'd felt that distinctive twitch that he only ever felt when he was making out with Alix.

Lips seemed to sense his consternation, and it seemed to amuse her. "You won't watch with me?"

Richard shook his head. "No thanks."

"*No one's* going to watch with me?" Lips looked at Chad, licked her lips, then

looked back at Richard. Licked her lips—

—there was an almost audible snap as Mrs. Foster's patience broke in two. Stepping forward, she said, "I'm going to have to ask you to leave."

Lips' expression lost its sultriness. She fixed Mrs. Foster with a chilled stare. "Why?"

"You *know* why."

"No, I don't—why don't you explain it to everybody?"

"This is *not* a scouting ground."

Lips scowled, and Richard thought for a moment that she and Mrs. Foster would have at each other's throats—but then Lips shrugged, stood up, and handed Mrs. Foster her glass. "Whatever you say."

Retrieving her clothes from Karla, she crossed the rooftop and, before descending the stairs, turned to face Richard. She regarded him steadily for a moment, the slightest smile curling the edges of her lips. "You can't tell me you actually *enjoy* hanging around these prudes," she said.

"They're my friends," Richard replied.

"I could be your friend too."

Richard shrugged, unsure of what else to say.

"Whatever," Lips said. "I'll make my own fun. You can stay here and drink your *lemonade*." She shot Richard another glance, winked, and then descended out of sight.

Mrs. Foster came up behind Richard and put her arm around him. "Don't you pay her any mind. She's trouble for anyone she crosses."

Richard nodded, thinking the same thing, but also wondering how much of Lips' arrogance was intentional and how much had to do with her underlying needs. While sex—*business*—had no doubt been at the forefront of her mind, there had been something else too, something Lips *hadn't* been revealing as she'd advertised her wares across the rooftop. There had been a longing in her eyes, and it hadn't merely been the desire for sexual companionship.

Richard headed for the stairs.

"Where are you going?" Mrs. Foster asked.

"Downstairs. I'll be back."

Mrs. Foster huffed, threw herself in Richard's path. "Oh, no you don't!"

"Why not?"

"You don't need anything like her dragging you down with its claws."

Richard rolled his eyes. "I'm not going after *her*. I have to go to the bathroom—unless you'd like me to do it up here, in one of the flowerpots?"

Mrs. Foster's mouth fell open, but she let him pass, and even though he regretted his choice of words immediately after saying them, it *was* true: he had to urinate.

He merely wanted to see Lips first.

Down in the plaza, he stepped along the breezeway, ignoring the guards and following Lips' distinctive smell as best he could. He found her just outside building A's east entrance—but she had already initiated contact with someone,

and was holding hands with him as they kissed and caressed in the shadows.

Sighing, Richard turned around and went into the washroom to relieve himself. Then he went back up to the roof.

Moving beside Mrs. Foster, he said, "I'm sorry. I would never pee on your plants."

"That's quite all right," Mrs. Foster replied. "I'm not your mother. But that woman...there are some things I just can't stand. I suppose it's my own fault for allowing myself to get agitated whenever I bump into her. And with everything that's happened today..."

Richard smiled halfway and stretched, noticed Lips' lemonade glass had been set at the edge of the roof, beside the stairs.

"I'm throwing the glass out," Mrs. Foster explained before Richard could ask why it was there.

"But—"

"*In the trash, Richard.*"

Richard sighed once more, nodded. "Yes, ma'am."

# Chapter 16

All day Thursday, Richard's thoughts were on Lips. Her visit to Mrs. Foster's abode had left him unsatisfied, and it had nothing to do with the promises insinuated by her hand on his bottom. Rather, it was her *look* that had affected him so, that sense of longing, of yearning, of something so deep that Lips had to bury it beneath years of sultry nights with random men. She'd wanted to be part of Mrs. Foster's group (and probably had since the beginning), but her ego had kept her in confrontation mode. There had been a story there too, something that Richard hadn't been capable of recognizing in times past, but now that he was older, its ominous details were starting to make just the slightest bit of sense.

Lips' predicament bugged him so much that as soon as the end-of-day bell sounded, he stalked directly to her apartment. He knocked, and when he didn't get an answer, barged right in on Lips and her companion-of-the-day, both of whom lay together on her large bed.

"What the hell?" Lips exclaimed. She looked outraged at first, but when she'd pulled enough of her hair out of her face to see that it was Richard who'd invaded her privacy, her scowl softened into a smile.

"Hello, Richard," she said.

Richard swallowed, aware that he was treading on thin ice. (He also thought it absolutely absurd that the man beneath Lips was just laying there, perfectly comfortable to wait things out.)

"We need to talk," Richard said.

"Do we, now?"

"Yes, if, um, it's not too much trouble."

Lips made no move to acquire modesty for herself or her partner. "You look uptight—upset," she said.

"I'm fine." Richard had influenced an entire plaza full of people yesterday; surely he could influence Lips now.

"I could take care of it for you."

"Don't change the subject."

Lips kissed her partner. "Darling, there's only one subject that's appropriate in here. You know that. *Everyone* knows that."

"That's exactly the problem!" Richard exclaimed, clenching his fists and stamping his foot on the floor.

"Oh?"

"I saw you last night. Mrs. Foster wanted you to leave, but I know you wanted to stay, and not just to watch something, but because deep down inside you're a

really nice person who just wants to be accepted for who she is and not what she looks like."

"We've all had our shots—you won't catch anything."

"They think we're all just a bunch of animals," Richard said.

"Who thinks that?"

"The military men who raided us yesterday."

"Oh, screw the government, Richard!" Lips exclaimed, her patience obviously at an end. "Did you come here to have fun or are you just going to lecture me to death?"

Richard bit his lip, thought for a moment. An image popped into his head—"Your mom used to comb your hair—when you were twelve, when you got your first period, there was an afternoon when the two of you sat together after your shower and she combed your hair and told you all she knew about becoming a woman."

Lips flinched, blinking around her as the room became hazy, memorized sunlight diffusing the sultry darkness, the walls melting away to reveal a yesteryear plaza.

"What the hell?" breathed Lips' partner.

Richard continued: "You were sad because you knew you were growing up, and that, according to your mother, all men care about is a woman's willingness to put out. In this world, she told you, a woman had to play a game in order to get what she wanted. So your mother taught you how to play the game. It killed her inside, she secretly prayed to God every night that you'd never need to put these certain specific skills to use, that if all else failed, you'd find something else to fall back on..."

As Richard spoke, Lips' story continued to manifest itself physically. There was the plaza, there was little Lips leaning against her mother for support as she cried bitter tears—

"Oh no you don't!" Lips shouted, jumping out of bed. She swatted at the burgeoning form of her mother and herself; her hand passed through the doppelgangers, causing them to ripple, but otherwise having no effect.

"You never wanted to be a bedroom companion," Richard continued, seeing the emotion welling behind Lips' eyes and knowing he was having an effect. "But you couldn't help it. As time passed, you looked around and saw the other girls getting results, getting things they wanted just by dropping a smile or blowing a kiss or doing other things that boys and men liked."

Somewhere in the background, the man Lips had been servicing had gotten out of bed and into his clothes, and was now standing dumbfounded beside the window.

"You little creep, *you little creep!*" Lips screamed, and launched herself at Richard, grabbing him around the neck and shoving him backward out of the bedroom and toward the door. He was stronger than she was, but her ferocity was a force of nature, delivering him out onto the pavement in a whirlwind of tangled hair, wild eyes, and sharp fingernails before he could do a thing about it.

Needless to say, his story blinked out of existence.

Lips stood in the doorway, bracing herself against the frame. "Don't you ever try that self-pity, your-pain-is-your-friend garbage with me again, you hear? You're off my list!"

She slammed the door.

Richard got to his feet, dusted off his arms and legs.

How appropriate, he thought. She kept a list.

* * *

The incident in Lips' apartment left Richard prematurely exhausted, and more than a little disillusioned. Not in the mood for socializing, he showered and washed his clothes himself. Then he went inside his apartment, blew past Gramma and Grampa, and threw himself onto his cot. He must have been crying out loud and for some time, because suddenly Gramma was there with him, sitting on the edge of his cot and stroking his hair, his cheek.

"Oh, Richard," she said softly. "What's the matter?"

"Everything's wrong," he replied.

"Tell me."

"I went to see Lips—"

Gramma's hand stiffened—

"—no, not for *that*—"

—and softened again.

"—she wouldn't listen to me. She just wants to sleep with everyone and give Steel Garden a bad name."

Gramma sighed. "After what happened yesterday, I don't think Lips is the only one giving the campus a bad name."

Richard rolled onto his back, wiped his arm across his face. "I changed things yesterday, during the raid. I told a story and slowed down time so that I could sneak into the garbage bin and get your meds."

"I knew you must have done something like that," Gramma said. "You didn't have to, you know."

"Of course I had to."

"And if I told you I'd decided I didn't want to take my pills anymore?"

Richard's eyes watered afresh, and he sat up. "Don't say that—don't *ever* say that."

"Why not?" asked Gramma placidly. "It's my choice."

"But...but without your meds you'd...you'd..."

"I'd die?" Gramma nodded. "Quite likely—but it would be my choice. I would be the one deciding not to take the pills. It wouldn't be Sigler's men taking them away from me and forcing me to accept the consequences."

"You'd really want to die?"

Gramma looked out the window. "I can accept death as an inevitability, but I don't *want* to die. I think about it every other night. I'd be lying if I told you I

wasn't scared."

Richard clasped Gramma's hand. "You won't die, Gramma. Not for a long while, okay?"

A smile crossed Gramma's face as she looked at Richard once again and squeezed his hand. "Oh, I wish your parents were here today. Somehow I think Jana would appreciate your righteousness."

"They wouldn't like it here," Richard said. "Not the way things are now. Too many rotten people doing rotten things—and too many people letting themselves fall into a rut. Lips could be a good person, if she wanted to. She just won't try."

"You can't change those who don't want to change."

"But she knows better! She *knows*! The story's in her eyes."

"It may be hard to understand," Gramma said, "but the world exists because of free will. Of all God's plans, this is the most benevolent and the most cruel. You have good intentions, but sometimes you just have to stand by and let someone live their life."

"Free will," Richard grunted. "Then there's nothing anyone can do? She'll always be the way she is?"

Gramma looked thoughtful. "She'll always make the best choices with the wisdom she has at the time. Maybe that doesn't make her a bad person. Maybe, also, we're not bad people for judging as long as we respect her choices are and should be hers. You said she has a story?"

Richard nodded.

"Tell it to me, then. Let's hear about the woman behind the woman."

"What good will that do?"

"Her story will be told—if nothing else, her story will be told."

Richard considered the notion, shook his head in agreement and crossed his legs, sat up straight. He was still a bit flustered, so some of the words came out wrong, some of the sentences didn't fit right, but he managed to convey a series of scenes that, when laced together, were relatively cohesive. It wasn't, he thought, one of his better narrations, but it was enough to loosen the knot in his stomach.

It was enough to make the rest of the evening bearable.

# Chapter 17

Richard turned twenty-one on Saturday.

At the breakfast table, Gramma offered him a hug and a smile as she poured him his milkshake, set out his nutrition bar on a fresh plate.

"My big man, today," she said.

Last year there had been a cake—and candles. But then, last year, Steel Garden's administrators hadn't yet had a complete lapse of reason.

There wasn't much to do after breakfast. Richard helped Grampa with his meal, with his pills; he puttered around the apartment, helping Gramma with the dusting and sweeping.

At noontime, Squirt came banging on the Doroschenkos' door, and even though the only information he offered was that he had a surprise, that it had nothing to do with a birthday party (aha!), Richard played along. He followed Squirt up onto the roof, where Mrs. Foster, the Hags, the laundry girls (well, Nina and Karla, at least), Jenna, Megan, and Juju sprang an impromptu birthday party on him. Refreshments were nonexistent, since the guards had removed all the "leftover" food items from building A's dormitories. There was ice water, though, served in tall, frosty glasses; there was music, card games with the Peterson girls; there was an abundance of smiles and laughter as the birthday boy was made to sit on a stool, Mrs. Foster standing beside him and presenting his yearly portraits while she rattled off various "precious memories."

Throughout, Richard thought there to be a subtle sort of lunacy to the proceedings. Here they were, a small gathering of campus grunts, no cake or candles or decorative streamers of any kind, trying to pretend it was a grand occasion to be celebrating a birthday in the Garden. Richard was sure everyone was on the verge of exploding from the pressure of recent events—and yet he hoped with all his might they would not. Privileges had been cut, trust betrayed, but his friends had adjusted.

It was almost comforting.

After an hour or so, when the party had played itself out, Richard cited his need to update his resident information as an excuse to leave. He thanked everyone for their birthday wishes, endured hugs and kisses from the women, a hearty pat on the back from Juju, and a high-five from Squirt.

He left the roof and walked northeast along the breezeway connecting building A to a small island of portable buildings. The records office was squat and stifling, the inside of which was sectioned off into a dozen cramped cubicles occupied by a dozen puffy bureaucratic types. A handful of workers were in line ahead of

Richard. No one spoke. Even though it was Saturday, everyone looked as exhausted as if they'd just gotten off work.

When it was his turn to be seen by a records officer, Richard sat in one of the cubicles and, at the officer's request, handed over his dog tag.

"All right, then," said the officer (who didn't introduce himself, but whose desk nameplate read: AB). "Let's see what we've got here." He scanned Richard's tag, browsed the readout on his computer terminal. "Ah—happy birthday, Mr. Doroschenko."

"Thank you," Richard said.

"Just a few changes to be made here in your file...you must be getting all geared up for your birthday party, eh?"

Richard shrugged, wondering if anyone had slipped Ab a memo concerning Steel Garden's recent food plan initiative.

"Okay," Ab said, "now that you have full adult status, I'll just go ahead and release you from your grandparents' guardianship and update you as head of household."

"Head of household?" Richard asked.

"Yes. Normally, since your grandmother is no longer an active resident, her household status would have been nullified upon her reaching the age of sixty-five. However, since you were a minor, and then a conditional adult, her guardianship had been extended. Now that you're emancipated, control of the household has been transferred to you."

Richard nodded, sat quietly as, with the click of a few buttons, his grandparents were rendered obsolete.

"All right," said Ab, once his data entry was complete. He returned Richard's dog tag. "You're all set. There's just one last item of business, Mr. Doroschenko."

"What?"

"Your grandparents. They'll need to come in for their exit interview."

"Exit interview?"

"Of course. Just a formality so that we can wrap up things here and have their transport arranged. Any idea where they've decided to go?"

Richard shook his head. "I'm going to continue taking care of them."

"Come now," Ab said with a laugh. "A strapping young fellow like yourself must want his own space! After a long day's work, don't you just want to come home and relax, not have to worry about getting up every five minutes to fetch your grandma a glass of water or your grandpa his slippers—what to do when you want to bring a girl over? And in the years to come, you'll no doubt be thinking about a family of your own. Will you be able to divide your time fairly between your work, your family, *and* your grandparents?"

Family? *Years to come?* How long did Ab expect the war to continue?

"I'll manage," Richard said, clenching his fists beneath the desktop. "Are we finished here?"

Ab sighed, pushing his chair back and sitting on the edge of his desk with his hands clasped in his lap. "Richard, forgive me if I'm pointing out the obvious, but

this is a *worker* campus. It's normal for residents over sixty-five years of age to be transferred to one of Pacifica's eligible senior homes. Due to your specific circumstances, a special exception was made in your case, and in the case of the Ferrera sisters—but growing old is a part of life. So is letting go. I'm sure your grandparents wouldn't want to burden you."

"It's *my* burden. I'm not asking anyone else to look after them."

"I'm afraid that's untrue. Where do you get their food from? Their clothes? Their medicine?"

Richard said nothing.

"The fact of the matter is, you're a beneficiary of the campus system. As cruel as it sounds, everybody here—you, me, your neighbors—is a liability, a responsibility of the landlord and a drain on resources we just don't have. Now, I can't make you decide to let your grandparents go, because you *are* their caretaker, but consider this: It may merely be an extra chore now, but what happens when, say, you grandmother has a stroke and can no longer walk? What happens if her mental abilities erode completely? What happens if she makes it into her nineties and all she can do is lay in bed, barely breathing, barely able to lift a finger? You'd have to bathe her everyday, wash her clothes, feed her, take care of her every need. And not just her, but your grandfather, too. I understand he's already lost his wits—"

Richard rose from his seat, his chair bumping unceremoniously against the cubicle wall. He said, "I'll take care of my grandparents."

"Very well," Ab said, relenting with a smile that was entirely too cheerful. "Good day to you, Mr. Doroschenko—oh, and once again, happy birthday."

Making no effort whatsoever to hide the scowl on his face, Richard turned around and left the cubicle.

# Chapter 18

The Whites arrived on Sunday morning, delivered to the Doroschenkos' doorstep at nine o'clock sharp. Richard answered the door and found a campus guard bearing lease papers and a trio of terrified-looking people—

—a new family.

"Where are your parents, son?" asked the guard.

Richard nodded over his shoulder. "You can talk to my grandmother, if you need to, but I'm the head of household."

The guard narrowed his eyes, produced his reader. Scanning Richard's dog tag (and, evidently, finding the information he needed), he sighed in a nonchalant manner and said, "The landlord has instructed me to deliver this family for temporary placement in your apartment."

"For how long?" Richard asked, trying to think of the appropriate questions to ask.

"I'm not certain," the guard said.

"How will this affect our food rations?"

"I don't know. The landlord—"

Richard waved his hand. "Yes, yes, I know. The landlord has all the details, you're only the messenger."

The guard paused momentarily, blinked once—as if only now, after he'd been subtly insulted, was he properly motivated in the matter. Perhaps cataloging a variety of retorts, and, perhaps, finding nothing suitable, he stepped back from the doorway and ushered the new family into the apartment.

"The landlord will be in touch with you," he said. Then he nodded and walked away.

Richard closed the door, turned to face the new family. They looked just like the city folk in the videos, their arms and legs thin as reeds, skin and hair pale, almost ashen. They were absolute newbies. From the way the husband trembled ever so slightly as he tried to keep a firm set to his jaw, to the way the wife blushed and looked away whenever she caught herself looking Richard or Gramma in the eye, to the way the son kept his eyes fastened on the floor at all costs, it was obvious this was their first time setting foot on a worker campus.

Extending his hand, Richard introduced himself to the father. "I'm Richard Doroschenko," he said. He gestured at Gramma, standing beside him, and Grampa, in his recliner. "This is my grandmother, Elda, and my grandfather, George."

"Carlton White," the father said. "My wife, Sonny. My son, Preston."

"Nice to meet you," Richard said, shaking everyone's hands.

Gramma offered the three breakfast table chairs to the Whites, and fetched glasses from the dish rack. Richard, meanwhile, receded, stood in the bedroom doorway and surveyed the scene. While the apartment was small enough as it was (and would only be more cramped with three extra bodies occupying space that was barely enough for three already), he supposed the Whites were lucky they'd been appointed here and not down the way to a less-hospitable family.

Hospitable or not, Sonny seemed to be having a hard time with the transition. She gripped her duffel bag in her lap and shook from head to toe as the tears streamed down her cheeks. Carlton had his arm around her, but it seemed to be having little effect.

Richard went to her, put his arm on her shoulder. "Are you going to be okay?" he asked.

Sonny looked up at him with an imploring expression on her face. "Is it always like this?" She glanced out the window, then quickly back to Richard again. "For everyone? Did they take your clothes too, all your belongings?"

"I was born here," Richard said. "I suppose I've never had more than I've needed."

Sonny continued to cry, and it dawned on Richard that where she came from there was probably air conditioning in every room, sinks with running water, closets filled with many different styles and varieties of clothing—she herself might have had several pairs of shoes at one time—but not now. Not here.

Not even food, he thought.

Letting go of Sonny's shoulder, he folded his arms and said, "It's not always been so strict here. It's always been hot, though. You'll get used to it. Winter's nice. You won't need any heavy coats."

Sonny continued crying. She didn't look too keen on showering naked in front of anyone, but already Richard could see the telltale sweat stains on her coveralls. Juju had been the same way, his first month in the Garden, but eventually the heat had gotten to him, and he'd relented—that was how it was: some days you could handle the constant buildup of sweat underneath your clothes, others it was so hot you just couldn't make an excuse for modesty; you shed your clothes and made for the shower and didn't care if anyone gawked.

"We'll get some cots in here as soon as possible," Gramma said, setting out glasses of ice water for everyone. "For now, I'll have Richard find you some extra blankets and pillows."

Carlton nodded, draining his glass in three long gulps. "Thank you."

A moment of silence as the Whites looked at the Doroschenkos, the Doroschenkos at the Whites.

"So, how did you guys get sent here?" asked Richard.

Gramma shot him a warning look.

"That's all right," Carlton said. "I'm not hiding anything from anybody." He glanced at Preston, whose eyes remained transfixed on the floor. "We felt—"

"*Dear*," interrupted Sonny.

"*I* felt," Carlton continued, "that war wasn't the answer. It was bad enough when we were fighting among ourselves, but when the Sol Union started snatching up any and every able-bodied young man once he turned eighteen I had to put my foot down, as a parent and as a human. A few days shy of my son's birthday, I signed us up for community service work. As long as we're residents here, they can't make our Preston fight."

Blushing, Preston swore under his breath and left the table. Sonny, who'd just managed to wrangle herself into a semi-presentable state, now began sobbing anew.

Carlton shot his son a frigid scowl. "See? We thought it was the Kur we were supposed to be watching out for, but it seems in *this* family a father's love for his son is the enemy."

Richard and Gramma exchanged worried glances.

"He's been like this all week," Carlton continued, now talking more to empty air than to anyone in particular. "Seems to think 'running away' isn't cool. Well, you know, good, honest work is no less patriotic than military service. You can serve humanity in *both* functions."

Preston looked like he was ready to explode, but there really wasn't anywhere for him to go—not in the apartment, anyway—and so he merely stood slightly apart from his parents and clenched his fists.

Gramma cleared her throat. "Richard...why don't you take Preston for a walk, show him around while I get our new roommates situated here?"

Richard nodded at Preston and led him out into the plaza. There were several other people up and about, showering or washing their clothes. A few said good morning to Richard, paid a glance or two at Preston.

"They'll put you to work first thing tomorrow morning," Richard said. "You'll probably want to have a shower later, wash your uniform. I can show you the ropes."

He led Preston on a guided tour of building A, the infirmary, the guardhouse, the office section.

"That's the warehouse," he said, pointing to the manufacturing dome on the way back to the plaza.

"And you guys make shuttle parts?" asked Preston, sounding only slightly more interested than he'd been at the start of the tour.

Richard shook his head. "No, but we assemble the components here. I'm kind of excited, because tomorrow I get to use the visors—the Kiengiri tech ones."

"Oh," said Preston.

Back in the plaza, Richard sat with Preston at the edge of the plaza, where the sun hadn't yet warmed the concrete. For the most part, Preston seemed to have accepted his new home—especially when one of the more shapely women went for a shower.

"This might be the first good thing about Steel Garden," he said, obviously appreciating the woman's form.

"Life here is simple, but you'll come to get used to it," Richard said.

Preston sniffed disdainfully. "I hope not. Don't take this the wrong way,

Richard, but there's nothing remotely cool about this place."

"Could be worse. It's all how you see things."

"You act like this is your home."

"It is. Yours too, now."

"No—this is a *prison*. Only criminals and losers get sent here. I learned that in class. Didn't your grandparents ever tell you?"

"No." Gramma hadn't.

"And you never caught on?"

Well, he *had*, but... "To what?"

Preston rolled his eyes. "Look around you. Where are the swimming pools, the basketball courts, the restaurants, the movie theaters—all the stuff that's *fun*?"

"Mrs. Foster has a bigscreen. She lets us watch it up on the roof during the evening. We also play cards or tell stories—"

"This is *so* lame," Preston said, frowning. "I'm going to spend the rest of my life with a bunch of grunts."

Richard bit his lip, clenched his gut tight as he felt the familiar pressure surging inside him. He almost wanted to cry, unabashedly devastated, just like Sonny, but he knew it wouldn't do any good. Especially not in front of his neighbors.

Preston made an uncomfortable face. "Hey, I didn't mean it like that." Looking annoyed, looking like he wanted to leave (but staying nonetheless), he put his arm around Richard's shoulders. "Tell me...why do they call this place 'Steel Garden' anyway?"

Richard shifted mental gears. "I can show you, if you want."

Preston sighed, nodded. "Fine."

"But we should probably go at sundown."

"Why?"

"We're not supposed to be running around aimlessly," Richard said. "The guards get antsy."

"Freakin' prison camp," Preston mumbled. "Okay—sundown it is."

# Chapter 19

During the day, the mill was merely a ruin, all sand and fissured pavement scarred with strands of sun-bleached dodder and surrounded by an aging chainlink fence. At sunset, however, the place was bathed in a scarlet glow, as if, Richard often imagined, this particular part of the Steel Garden campus had been grafted onto some ancestral plain—Sedona, maybe. Or perhaps Mars.

Preston's skin had an orange tinge to it, Richard's a slightly darker hue. They'd left their coveralls and dog tags back at the apartment, just in case Parsons' feelers were in an ornery mood.

"The Garden used to be a steel mill," Richard explained, testing the chainlink with a handful of tossed pebbles. Reasonably certain that it wasn't live, he hopped the fence, his hands and feet raising clouds of dust as he landed lightly on the other side. (Preston followed his example, and only stumbled slightly on his way down.)

"Later on," Richard continued, "when people started having kids, the administrators added the campus and warehouse. No one uses this place anymore —but it's still kind of neat to come down here after work, when no one's around. Want a peek inside?"

Preston scrutinized the mill's façade with a doubtful frown. "Is it safe?"

"There are no wild animals. As for rules, the security chief has never told us we can't come here. There are no keep-away signs." And as for Parsons' curfew, well, Richard would only need a few minutes to show Preston around.

"I meant structurally," said Preston.

Richard shrugged. "I've been here dozens of times, and lived to tell about it."

Preston didn't seem convinced, but he followed Richard anyway, navigating along cracked concrete walkways and holding onto rusted railings. They didn't go into the furnace area, as it was dark (they were barefoot, and so not invulnerable to sharp objects), but they did make a circuit of the stove. Afterward, they stopped beside the coke oven to take a breather. By now their hands and feet were black, their bodies smeared with dust. Richard was more than a little woeful over not having brought his water bottle.

Wringing his hands, Preston said, "I'm going to need a shower."

Richard nodded, ready to start back home when suddenly he heard a scuffling behind him.

Then:

"Psst! Buddy!"

Richard almost jumped out of his skin. He'd been sitting with his back facing the oven, but now he jumped up, let out a surprised yelp as he turned around to

catch a glimpse of whatever grotesque alien creature had been hiding in the shadows, watching all this time—

—it was Newbie. Trembly, frail-looking Newbie, just as Richard remembered him, only now he was naked, filthy, quite unkempt.

"Oh, geez," Newbie said, holding up his hands, palms outward. "Sorry—sorry! Don't run, please!"

Richard glanced at Preston, then back at Newbie. "What are you doing here?"

"Hiding," Newbie said, keeping himself pressed against the side of the oven. "My superiors, er, caught me with that Lips gal."

"That shouldn't matter," said Richard. "Don't all you military guys come here for women like her anyway?"

Newbie blushed. "It's sort of an urban myth, back in the city...you know, making it with a chick who can't get you sick—who can't *get* sick. There are so many people in the cities, you can't vaccinate everyone, but here, in a closed environment—but that's beside the point. You were right. That morning you ran into me at my post. They watch everything you do—I guess I wasn't careful enough about keeping my affairs to myself. They'll look the other way, but when the bitch goes off and *tells* on you..."

"So, that's why they're looking for you?" Richard asked, amazed, enraged. "Because you slept with Lips?"

Newbie shrugged.

"They cleared us out, you know. Each and every apartment. Thought you were hiding in the dormitory. And now they've got men everywhere. How have you managed to remain free?"

"I'd like to say it's my training," said Newbie, "but it probably has more to do with the fact that the administration here is about as half-assed as you can get. They don't like to pay for anything. They say this is one of the only remaining worker campuses monitored by the old school RFID-based bots. No infrared or anything. Still, I'm screwed."

Richard folded his arms. "Was it worth it?"

"What?"

"Sex with Lips."

Newbie shook his head and laughed in a faraway manner. "Jesus, buddy. It's like touching the sun, except after she'll present you with a ridiculously long list of things—amenities, food, perfumes, music—she wants you to get her in exchange for her services. The first kiss alone was worth the trouble it would be to find her a copy of Cecil Carmichael's debut album. I don't know why I didn't bother to pay up. Now she's gone and told everyone I'm a horny jackass, says she's taken me off her *list*."

"She crossed me off the list too," Richard said.

Newbie and Preston exchanged looks.

"I'm not even going to ask," said Newbie.

Richard caught the prurient gleam in Preston's eyes, glared at him. "We should be getting back home. We've stayed too long already."

"Wait!" Newbie gasped. "Just...do you *have* to leave now?"

"I got in trouble," Richard explained. "Me and my girlfriend broke curfew and Parsons busted us. I don't want it to happen again."

"Won't you stay?" Newbie pleaded. "Don't worry about Parsons. He's all talk. Besides, this is probably going to be my last night here. I don't know what's going to happen—I've got a story to tell you. You *are* the guy who collects stories, right?"

Richard had never considered himself a *collector*, though he sort of liked the title. Since Preston didn't seem all that keen on returning to their apartment just yet, Richard nodded and said, "I guess we could stay for a little while longer."

Newbie beamed. Despite the gathering darkness, he insisted that Richard and Preston follow him to a more private location. However, he seemed to know the way as he led them down into a subterranean pit that had, at one time, housed the mill's gigantic furnace. Here, he'd gathered a small cache of food and water—no blanket or pillow, but, then, it was never so cool in the Garden to warrant much in the way of bedclothes anyway.

Most interesting, though, was the thing spread out on the floor. Newbie flicked on a small flashlight, and upon first seeing the thing, Richard experienced a nerve-wracking, muscle-jolting pang of fear. He would have run screaming from the room had Preston not immediately darted forward and exclaimed, "A Kur costume! Cool!"

Newbie crouched beside the costume. "See?" He ran his finger over the zipper, which wavered to the touch. "Adaptive seams—this is no ordinary Halloween costume. This is professional movie-type gear. Nanotech fabric. Probably cost a fortune."

"Is this your costume?" Preston asked, running his fingers over the mask.

"No," said Newbie. "I sort of stole it."

"Do they really look like this?" Richard asked, unable to mask the tremble in his voice. "The Kur, I mean."

"Who knows?" Newbie replied. "Unless you're on the front lines, *no one's* supposed to know, because it's something our brains can't handle. But this is the popular interpretation of what a Kur looks like."

"Makes you think," said Richard.

"About what?" asked Preston.

"About the first human to see a Kur face-to-face. If it's suicide to look at one, how was that first person sane enough to warn everyone else?"

"Somebody probably knew what he was up to before he actually saw the Kur," Preston guessed. "Like, maybe he told everyone he was going to spy on a Kur campsite. When he returned, all cuckoo in the head, his colleagues probably put two and two together and figured it was a bad idea for humans to trample on Kur campsites."

"I wonder," Richard said, "how many people went nuts before it became obvious what the cause was?"

Newbie looked impatient. "Listen, that's not important right now. This costume...I was supposed to wear it next week. A couple of the guys stopped by my

bunk one morning and told me that I was expected to perform a 'sighting.' They told me all the newbies here have to do it, and that it's sort of a tradition."

Richard frowned. "I've never heard of it."

"Neither have I. I thought it was a joke at first—but then I get called into Parsons' office, no explanation. I get there, and there are two guards standing outside the door. They tell me Parsons is expecting me. I go inside, and the office is empty. The Kur costume is in Parsons' chair, with a note attached—it's got a location and a date for me to wear the costume. There are instructions for me to return the suit afterward and to not mention the sighting to anyone. Really strange. I mean, it seems so unlike Parsons to waste time on practical jokes, but there it is, right in front of me where Parsons should be sitting. I might have gone along with the scheme, but it just seemed kind of messed up, you know? They wanted me to prowl around the campus dressed as the enemy—I think they wanted to put on a show for the residents here, prove the security team is still worth a paycheck by 'capturing' a rogue Kur soldier. Propaganda, man."

Newbie looked at Richard; Richard looked at Preston; Preston looked back at Richard.

"Don't look at *me*," Preston said. "I'm new here, remember?"

Richard sighed, wiped the back of his arm across his forehead. "You know that guy who ran off into the desert last week?"

"Yeah," said Newbie, nodding.

"His name's Juju. He told me he saw a bunch of army guys setting up a temporary launchpad a couple of miles from here. He thinks the skirmish was staged."

"Holy hell."

"They caught him, locked him up in jail for the weekend. When he got out, his memory had been erased."

"Is this kind of thing normal?" asked Preston, a worried look on his face. "Is this the kind of thing they do to you here if you misbehave?"

Newbie shook his head. "Not to civilians. At least, I've never heard any stories like that until now—unless Parsons is really more insane than any of us first thought."

"Then I wonder," Richard said, slowly, "if the whole Union idea is just a bunch of crap—a scheme to separate the grunts from the rich city folk."

Preston looked insulted. "Hey, I was born and raised in Pacifica, and there's a lot of poverty there, too."

Newbie narrowed his eyes. "Did you live in a house or an apartment?"

"Well, a house—but I had lots of friends who lived crammed in the downtown high-rises, so if the campus system *was* thrown together for someone else's benefit, it wasn't Pacifica's."

"Or maybe it's for *certain people* in Pacifica," said Richard. "They believe one story, we believe another, so long as it keeps us at our jobs."

Before Preston could respond, Newbie held up his hand and said, "Hang on. Buddy—Richard, is it?"

"Yes."

"Richard. I think you're on to something. Call it paranoia, but the fact of the matter is we're sitting beside a piece of work that would probably cost more to rent than any of us campus fodder makes in a month. You already said they've tinkered with your friend Juju's memory—now they're screwing with *our* heads."

"I think..." Richard began, but trailed off when he realized he didn't really know what to think at all. Rather, he knew what he *wanted* to think, and he was afraid of what terrible conclusions might occupy the void in his mind if he didn't fill it with something, anything— "I think this could be the biggest joke in the world."

Preston looked thoughtful for a moment. "I don't know. We're fighting against *something*. It's all over the media. Have you seen the legions of fighters they send out every week?"

"Yeah," Newbie agreed. "I don't think the Kur are made-up, exactly. I'm not trying to be anti-government here, but I had to tell someone what I experienced firsthand. I'm still for my people, my species, but I think this campus is bogus."

Richard agreed. He'd been thinking about this sort of thing all week—he supposed it had *always* been in the back of his mind, ever since the landlord had decided to enforce the dress code, years ago. Still, he couldn't *say* exactly what he felt out loud because his gut was already tightening once again, muscles clenching and constricting, trying to compress a lifetime of unrealized oppression.

"Are you all right?" Newbie asked, noticing Richard's predicament.

"Yeah," said Preston. "You look like you're constipated or something."

Richard swallowed, stood, wiped his face. "We should get going."

Preston nodded. "I definitely need a shower."

Newbie showed them out, killing the flashlight as soon as they reached open air.

"I'm going to make a run for it," he said, a grave expression on his face—borderline terror. "A couple of hours from now, if you hear the bots going wild, you'll know it's because I'm getting myself bound and gagged."

Despite Newbie's intended humor, Richard knew the man was serious. "Good luck," he said, and pumped Newbie's hand. Then he and Preston started home.

"What do you think of your first day in the Garden?" Richard asked as they moved from bush to bush, tree to tree, never allowing so much as a toe or finger to be illuminated by the security phosphors.

"Except for the naked chicks in the showers," Preston replied, "it's sucked so far. I could kill my dad for bringing us here."

"You wanted to be a fighter."

Preston sighed. "I don't know. All my friends back home talk about what they want to do after graduation. Either get a city job or join the military—something to give back to the Union. I wouldn't have minded being drafted. Beats hiding out in a hellhole like this. God, it's hot. I wonder if I might still get myself into a fighter jet. You know, just to see first hand what the enemy looks like."

"If there's an enemy at all," Richard snorted.

"You believe that crazy guy who ran off into the desert?"

"Maybe."

Preston laughed. "I thought you were just humoring that dude in the mill so he wouldn't kill us or have his way with us or something."

"You really want to see a Kur soldier?"

"I really do."

"But then you'd have to die."

"Yeah—but I'd *know*, at least. I could go to heaven, or wherever it is you go after you die, and I wouldn't be the only angel not getting the joke."

Richard chuckled. He and Preston walked into building A's plaza and went straight for the showers. Above, the Hags whistled and cooed, telling Richard he'd missed a spot, telling Preston he'd broken the Caucasian stereotype once and for all.

"I think they like you," Richard jested, nudging Preston in the ribs.

"Shut up," said Preston.

# Chapter 20

Still, stuffy night air caught between rumpled, sweat-soaked sheets and matted, tangled hair plastered to his forehead, the sides of his face—Richard's thoughts were a jumble, half dream stuff and half coherent. He didn't really mean to ask the question, it just slipped out before he could come fully awake:

"What did you and Grampa do to get sent here?"

He heard Gramma shift in her bed. "What?"

Richard sat up, took a breath, dabbed at his face with the back of his hand. "What did you and Grampa do to get sent here?" he asked again.

A sigh from Gramma, her bedclothes rustling. "That White boy has been putting ideas into your head hasn't he?"

"Was he right?" Richard pressed.

"Not in here," Gramma whispered. "We'll wake George."

She got out of bed, slipped into her clothes; Richard too. Since the White family was occupying the living room, Richard and Gramma crept carefully, left the apartment entirely. They found a spot on a bench near the showers that was relatively private, despite the guards' presence. Gramma sat quietly, staring straight ahead and biting her lip, her hands fidgeting in her lap.

"Well?" asked Richard after several minutes of uneventful silence. "What did you do?"

"*We* didn't do anything," Gramma replied.

"So, what, then? Were you poor? Is that it? You couldn't afford a place in the city, so they sent you and Grampa here?"

Gramma looked uncomfortable. "Richard...this is difficult for me. You must understand. Your parents...they asked me to keep it a secret, but now...now that you're old enough, now that things are the way they are..."

Richard swallowed. "You're going to tell me now, aren't you?"

"Our government," Gramma said, "doesn't take lightly to traitors. Your parents—well, Robert, at least—they had some unorthodox ideas regarding the war. They believed the Kiengiri were unfairly using Earth as a pit stop for their soldiers, displacing billions of humans and offering inadequate medical and technological compensation in return. Robert and Jana attended all the rallies, staged a number of demonstrations, some passive, most not. They eventually got themselves locked up for setting fire to a Kiengiri safe house. You were barely a year old at the time—they gave George and myself custody and sent us here to work off the court fees."

Richard was speechless—all his life he'd imagined his parents as war heroes. Now, it turned out, they were actually war *criminals*.

He said, "The government sent you here to pay for my parents' mistakes, then."

"Your parents couldn't pay the lawyer fees, *we* couldn't pay them—and you were just a baby. Someone had to take care of you. It was either us or an orphanage. So we took you in, agreed to enter the campus system as a show of loyalty to the Union."

"So...so my parents are still alive in some prison somewhere?"

Gramma wiped a tear from her cheek. "Maybe. I don't know. I don't want to get my hopes up too high. You know how Pacifica has been overcrowded for so long...every so often I hear a news piece going around the campus about corrupt wardens 'clearing house.' I...I don't like to think about of how my Jana might find herself in a worst-case scenario."

"You mean they...they kill prisoners?" asked Richard, appalled.

"They're not supposed to. It would be like Mr. Parsons or Mr. Sigler deciding there were too many of us here in the Garden and arranging for several of us to be ejected into the desert without food or water. They could do that, of course, because there's no one around here for miles and miles. Even so...I try to tell myself it's all for some greater good, the soldiers, human and Kiengiri, fighting to keep Earth free."

Gramma burst into tears. Richard had never seen her cry like this before, great heaving sobs that shook him to the root as he held her, tried mightily to somehow release the pressure inside himself without going all to pieces as well.

Oh, but it was hard!

"Is everything all right?"

Richard looked up, saw a night guard standing over him. The man wore a sympathetic expression, but Richard wasn't fooled as he helped Gramma to her feet.

Scowling, he said, "No, everything's *not* all right."

He led Gramma back to the apartment.

# Chapter 21

The Whites were in bad shape on Monday morning. Though Richard and Gramma were as polite as possible about waking everyone up, there was no shortage of annoyed grunts and extended yawns as one by one, Carlton, Sonny, and Preston were roused into a morning already piping with the heat of day.

"They say the world is ten degrees hotter than it was a century ago," Sonny said, standing before the mirror and trying to comb out her matted hair, "but you don't really feel it until you're outside the city, outside the thermal dampeners."

Preston snorted. "Maybe you should have thought about that *before* you let dad move us out here to Satan's armpit."

Richard, who'd been pulling on his boots, looked up to catch a volatile exchange of glares between Preston and Carlton. For a moment, Richard was certain there would be an argument—but then, as quickly as it had begun, the moment was past, and the Whites lined up, ready to begin their first workday.

Richard led the way. Outside, building A's workers filed out of their apartments in uninspired lines and walked along the sidewalk that lead to Klug's warehouse. Juju fell into step beside Richard, appraising the Whites over his shoulder and raising his eyebrow at Richard every so often, but not saying anything until the two of them were in the locker room.

Donning his hardhat, he said, "So, this is where the rich families are spending their vacation time these days?"

"Mr. White didn't want his son to fight in the war," Richard explained. "So he signed his family up for community service here in the Garden. The landlord stuck them in our apartment."

Juju shook his head. "Blatant mismanagement—and for what? A modest increase in factory output? Unbelievable! And they look about as enthusiastic as a bunch of pallbearers. Except for the kiddo over there." He nodded across the way at Preston, who'd been assimilated by Grabs and Lucas in what appeared to be a lively discussion concerning—what else?—sex.

"Pallbearers?" asked Richard.

"Never mind," said Juju. "My symbolic sense has merely latched onto the bad vibes wafting around here lately. It's not a good sign that they're bringing in new workers when we have nowhere to put them."

Richard nodded. He could feel something too, heat welling within heat. It pressed in on him from all angles, it burned under his skin. Whenever he passed close to someone, he could feel more than just their bodily temperature.

It was as if every resident of Steel Garden had had their aura set on fire.

"Primal release," Juju continued. "The sort of thing that takes years to build up—it's in all the latest gossip."

"What do you mean?" asked Richard.

"I don't want to say the word here," Juju replied, leering over his shoulder. "Too many listening ears tuned in—but I bet the Hags will have a mouthful or two for you."

* * *

"News," Richard said flatly as he sat himself before the Peeping Hags. He was slightly out of breath, still sopping wet from his after-work shower, having forgone the extra step of drying himself just so he could get up onto the roof as soon as possible.

"Good day to you, too," Magda said, curtly.

Eudora added, "My, not even going to ask us how we are?"

Welma merely sniffed.

"Ladies, please," Richard groaned. "Juju tells me there's something strange going on around campus. I figure if he knows something about it, you must know *everything* about it."

"Hmf!" said Eudora. "Why should we tell you anything? After all, you've gone public with your intentions toward that Alix girl."

"I have *not*," Richard growled, blushing.

"Oh, but you have, haven't you? Are we not enough that you have to run around late at night chasing young girl-flesh?"

"You three seeded that story!" Richard cried. "I was only trying to help everyone out with the food situation."

"Come now," Magda said. "There have been many other occasions on which you've been caught in that laundry room, shall we say, letting your hands get busy."

Welma tittered.

Richard frowned, tried to think how the details of his love life had been acquired by the Hags—

"*Squirt*," he said, making a mental note to chastise the boy the next time they ran into each other.

"Squirt," Magda echoed, nodding. "He's small and squirrelly, able to get into any wall, through any crack."

"I hope you're happy," Richard said, "spying on people like that."

"Oh, it wasn't our idea—it was *never* our idea. Squirt is merely a boy, and so is interested in the things that interest boys. A story is a story; it's all the same for a cookie or two."

"Alas," said Welma, "there are no more cookies."

"Alas," Eudora agreed.

The Hags' joviality faded, and in this moment, they became as serious as Richard had ever seen.

"News?" he asked, this time more patiently.

"We come up here to get away from the heat," said Magda, "as well as for the view."

"Yes, yes, the men showering," Richard said.

"No," said Welma. "An *objective perspective*—"

"—between delightful glimpses of male anatomy," added Eudora.

Magda glared at her sister. "See, up close, you're embedded in the moment, so it's hard to keep track of what's going on around you, but from up here...up here you can see the big picture."

"People," said Welma. "Movement. Changes."

Eudora: "Yes, changes."

Richard leaned back, stretching his legs and flexing his toes. He glanced around the rooftop, which, he now realized, was becoming more and more desolate with each passing day. Mrs. Foster still tended to her garden (though she was uncommonly absent today), but it was without her former passion that she watered and trimmed Steel Garden's only source of foliage. It seemed as she suffered some emotional malady, so did her plants become withered, brittle.

Heat within heat.

"I fear, Richard," Magda said, "that our fellow residents have reached their wit's end."

Welma: "There's only so much room for the pressure. Once it reaches the critical point..."

Eudora: "Look down into the plaza. See the bigger picture."

Richard complied, getting up and walking over to the roof's edge. Resting his arms against the ledge, he peered down below and saw that people were paired up, head-to-head, whispering to each other between casual glances at the guards. The Steel Garden security team was monitoring the workers, but the workers were also monitoring the Steel Garden security team.

He hadn't noticed this before; he wondered how long it had been going on, this story within a story—this heat within heat.

"You think...you think they're planning something?" he asked after a moment.

"People are always *planning*," replied Welma. "What concerns us is that they may very well be ready to *act* on their plans."

Richard frowned. "Juju is always talking about a revolt."

"Could be. People might get hurt."

"Really?"

Welma glanced at Magda, who glanced at Eudora, who, in turn, leaned forward and tapped Richard's foot. "We're not supposed to say anything, but...you're a man now. You deserve to know."

"Know what?"

"There's been talk," Magda said, leaning forward as well (in fact, all three women now formed a conspiratorial huddle around Richard). "We don't know who got the idea rolling, but there's going to be another riot."

Richard's eyes widened. "When?"

"Before the month is out. That's all we know."

"But—"

"Shh!" Magda and her sisters jerked back into their previous positions with amazing agility. "Here comes Juju. Act normal—you didn't hear anything from us, Richard."

Richard nodded, relaxed himself as Juju stepped up to the group and folded his arms.

"Good evening, ladies," Juju said.

Magda's mood shifted seamlessly into the naughty. Smacking her lips, she said, "Hmm, Dark Chocolate—come to indulge our visual senses with all those big, beautiful muscles, have you?"

"There's just *one* muscle I'm interested in," said Eudora.

Richard made a face and covered his ears. "I don't need to hear this!"

Welma returned Juju's scowl, then looked at Richard. "Have you any news for us today?"

"The Kur may be a hoax," Richard said, holding up his hands for effect. "Me and Preston saw one of the costumes down at the junkyard. Newbie showed us."

"Really, now?" Juju swore under his breath. "You saw that twit and you didn't turn him in?"

"Why would I?"

"Because he's done us all in! If he hadn't crapped his pants and gone into hiding, Parsons and Sigler probably wouldn't have thrown such a tantrum and raided our apartments!"

"He's not one of *them*, Juju. He was scared, and just as upset as you are about the way the campus is being run. That's why he went into hiding."

Juju shook his head. "Convenient for him—he hasn't had his home torn apart, his personal belongings categorized and screened for appropriateness."

Magda said, "Ignore him, Richard. He's just in a cranky mood today. Now, tell us...why do you think the Kur are a hoax?"

Richard shrugged. "Well, I don't know for sure, of course, but it just seems kind of funny that no one's ever seen a Kur, we're just supposed to believe they exist—and now Newbie tells me that he's been ordered to wear a costume that's supposed to look like what everyone believes a Kur is supposed to look like—"

"Newbie told you this?" Juju interrupted.

"Yes," said Richard. "He said he was told by the security chief to help stage a 'sighting' somewhere on the campus."

Welma paid her sisters a worried glance. "Oh, dear. Why on Earth would anyone want to do such a thing?"

"To scare us," Richard said. "To keep us from questioning the guards' ability to protect us. I bet with the food truck riot, Parsons needed a way to bolster support for his team, so he figures if he 'captures' a rogue alien in front of us we'll be more appreciative of his services."

Juju let out a low whistle. "You're even more paranoid than I am, kiddo."

"All these months hanging around you," Eudora said, pointing an accusing finger at Juju, "have finally corrupted the poor boy's mind."

"Wait a minute," said Juju. "I admit I've offered an idea or two, but even *I* don't think the entire Union is putting on the greatest show ever staged."

Richard felt the blood rush to his face. "The skirmish was staged. Isn't that what you said?"

"You have a point."

An uncomfortable silence fell over the group, and Richard realized no one wanted to come out with the obvious, lest the onset of an impending disaster be accelerated prematurely.

Getting to his feet, he said, "I'm going to check on my grandparents."

He turned and left the Hags' table, grabbed his clothes from the line. In his grandparents' apartment, Carlton and Sonny sat at the breakfast table and fanned themselves with sheets of paper as the sweat rolled down their cheeks, soaked their coveralls. Gramma was sitting with Grampa by the rear window; she had a wet rag draped over her head, Grampa's too.

Richard went to her. "How are you guys holding up?"

"I can't take it anymore," Gramma rasped. "This is the worst heatwave yet, and summer's not even here."

"Summer's *always* here," Richard chuckled, trying to lighten the mood.

Gramma didn't laugh.

With a sigh, Richard glanced over his shoulder. Carlton was saying something to Sonny, but, upon Richard's entrance, she'd immediately bowed her head and kept her eyes on the floor.

Richard went into the bedroom and lay on his cot, though he didn't sleep. There were a number of things on his mind, namely his grandparents' meds and the forthcoming revolt. Either scenario presented an endless combination of uncertainties. He didn't know what he was going to do, what was going to happen, whether or not Marion was going to be as benevolent during next month's doctor visit. He needed someone to talk to, but he didn't feel like going back up to the roof—and Preston, why, he'd taken immediately to Grabs and Lucas once he'd realized they had girlfriends just as scandalously-minded as they were.

Richard thought of Alix. He wondered if her parents had eased up on her yet, if maybe she wasn't laying in her own room this very second thinking about him—

—he slid out of bed. The Hags weren't supposed to have tipped him off, but if there was going to be some sort of violent uprising anytime soon, he was obligated to tell his girl.

Whether Mr. Campos liked it or not.

He went to building B, only this time he went around the back way, avoiding the plaza altogether. He crept to the Campos' bedroom window, which wasn't as suicidal as one would think because Alix's family had a setup slightly different than the Doroschenkos in that she got the bedroom to herself; her parents slept out in the living room.

He carefully peered inside, saw Alix resting on her cot. "Psst! Alix!" he hissed.

Alix flinched, sitting up; when she saw Richard, she relaxed and came to the window.

"Can you sneak out for a while?" Richard asked.

Alix shook her head. "Richard...we need to talk."

"Are you still in trouble?" he asked, and leaned in for a kiss.

She pushed him away, glanced to and fro, over her shoulder. "I was sick this morning."

Richard frowned. "Are you guys on the new food plan?"

"I'm pregnant, Richard."

Richard's eyes very nearly bulged out of their sockets. "Pregnant? But...but how—by *whom*?"

"By you!" Alix said, slapping him.

"But I—we've never—I mean...it was all stories."

Alix sighed and took his hand. "Not *all* of it was stories."

Richard's pulse was off the scale; suddenly there was sweat streaming down his face. Being officially put in charge of his grandparents' well-being was one thing, but to know that in mere months he would have a *child* to take care of...that was too much. "Oh, no...oh, no...oh, no..."

Alix rolled her eyes. "Relax, Richard. You're acting like *you're* the one who's going to have the baby."

Richard buried his face in his hands. "Oh, Alix. I'm so sorry."

"Don't be. If I ever wanted to have someone's child, it would definitely be yours. It's just happened a little sooner than I thought."

"But what about your parents? How will they take this? I don't think I can show my face in front of them ever again."

A sigh from Alix. "It wouldn't be a good idea. My mom's still kind of numb—*I'm* still kind of numb—but my dad...it's probably best that you keep away for a while. When the time comes, um, well, we can do whatever we need to do."

"I'm supposed to tell you that there's going to be a revolt."

"Really? When?"

"I don't know," Richard replied, looking up. There was motion behind Alix—Mrs. Campos stepping into the bedroom.

"Alix," said Mrs. Campos. "You should be resting—" She halted when she saw Richard. "Richard...if my husband catches you—"

It was already too late. Richard saw Mr. Campos entering the room and stepping quickly toward the window, a look of utter outrage on his face.

Richard held up his hands. "Sir—"

There wasn't time to think of what to say next (and even if there *had* been time, there probably wasn't anything Richard could do to forestall the inevitable). Mr. Campos lunged at him through the window, grabbed him around the neck and lifted him up off the ground.

"I trusted you, you little bastard!" he yelled. "You were one of the family, but you caused trouble for us, got our food taken away with your little nighttime thievery stunt—and then you went and knocked up my daughter!"

Richard struggled for air, arms and legs flailing uselessly. Alix and her mother were trying to pry Mr. Campos away, but he was all rage, one big muscle squeezing

the life out of Richard.

"Stop it!" Mrs. Campos shouted.

"Daddy, no!" screamed Alix. "Don't hurt him!"

Mr. Campos squeezed harder. "He's a grown man—let him take his licks!"

There were stars clouding Richard's vision. He coughed out a plea for mercy, beat at Mr. Campos's arms with his fists, but to no avail. Mr. Campos didn't let go until he was good and ready—and even then, when he set Richard down on shaky feet, still grasping him around the neck with one hand, he didn't relent. Using his free arm, he punched Richard in the face. The blow sent Richard's vision flashing bright white, and Mr. Campos shoved him spinning backward. For a moment he was blinded, then he blinked, found he was lying on the ground, warm, salty blood dribbling into his mouth.

"Don't come around here anymore," warned Mr. Campos. He slammed the window, drew the curtain closed.

Richard groaned and sat up. His whole head hurt, and now there were tears mixing with the blood on his face. He could hear the Campos' fighting inside, could hear Alix's sobbing—but there wasn't anything he could do. Not unless he wanted an encore thrashing from Mr. Campos.

He stumbled home. Mrs. Foster, who'd been filling her watering pot, caught him as he walked into the plaza.

"Oh, my stars!" she cried. "What's happened to you?"

"I kind of got in a fight with Alix's dad," he replied.

"Whatever for?"

He started to say, "Because I got Alix pregnant," but quickly cut himself off. Instead, he said, "He got mad at me for stealing food from his building."

Mrs. Foster shook her head. "That man is nothing but trouble! He should know better—but look here, your nose is bleeding. Let me get you something for that."

Mrs. Foster disappeared into her apartment. She returned with a washcloth and sat Richard down on one of the benches so she could clean him off.

"He's always been a firecracker," she said as she worked. "If I were you, I would report this to the security chief."

Richard considered the suggestion, but decided against it, knowing there would be questions, accusations—and if Mr. Campos was locked up for a while, it would undoubtedly infuriate him further, perhaps inspire him to seek out retribution against Richard for tattling. Besides that, though, Richard's main concern was the attention. The Hags, Mrs. Foster, Juju—possibly Gramma—knew he had a girlfriend, and they knew he'd fooled around with her from time to time, but it was supposed to have been responsibly. Kissing, holding hands, clothing on at all times. True, they'd not always kept entirely to the rules. He *thought* he'd handled his affairs with Alix responsibly—now everyone was going to know he was just another Garden stereotype. Guards wearing Kur costumes, residents stashing illegal drugs and alcohol in their apartments, women prostituting themselves, unplanned pregnancies; he'd always made fun of Grabs and Lucas for their

haphazard approach to sex, but *he* was the one who'd gone and slipped up first.

"You've spaced out on me," said Mrs. Foster.

Richard blinked. He looked at Mrs. Foster, studied her face as she leaned back slightly to dab more peroxide onto her washcloth. She looked even worse now than she had a few days ago.

"I was just thinking," he said.

"Always thinking, eh?"

"Yes."

"Goodness, Richard. Your eye is all puffy. I should get some ice."

"I'll put some on at home."

"Still, you should tell Parsons."

"I'm fine. Really."

"But what if Mr. Campos has done this sort of thing to his wife? To Alix?"

"I've never seen any bruises," Richard said. "I think he only beats up random neighbors he doesn't like."

Mrs. Foster didn't look convinced.

Richard sighed, politely refusing any further assistance as he rose from the bench. "Everything's going to be okay. I think it's just the heat that's gotten to people." That, and many, many other things.

He started to leave, but turned back when a thought popped into his head. "Mrs. Foster?"

"Yes, Richard?"

"Is that why they send people here? Because they're too unstable to live in the city?"

Mrs. Foster snorted. "Do you think *I'm* too unstable to live in the city?"

"No," Richard laughed. "But...why *did* you come here?"

"Do you really want to know?"

"You've never told me."

Mrs. Foster shrugged. "You were young. You weren't my child—it was up to your grandparents to decide when to explain how the campus system works. I suppose they wanted you to have a decently innocent childhood, but now...you've figured it out, haven't you?"

"Somewhat, I guess."

"Then you know why I'm here," Mrs. Foster said. "You know why we're all here. Destitution, social deviance—working here is a second chance. A way to make up for the things we don't like about ourselves."

Richard pouted. "You're not going to tell me the details, are you?"

Mrs. Foster's expression was distant. She didn't necessarily seem evasive, but she wasn't forthcoming either. She was...stuck. In her own thoughts, her own memories.

Richard sighed, left her like that, staring off into a corner of the plaza and entertaining ideas only she could understand.

# Chapter 22

Richard got very little sleep over the rest of the workweek. It didn't help that Preston, at every occasion, made it a priority to share his amatory adventures with excruciating detail. Grabs and Lucas had apparently found him a girlfriend with a hedonistic attitude toward sex. It made Richard intensely jealous that Preston could avail himself of this girl every night and not get her pregnant—yet Richard had hardly touched Alix and somehow she was with child. He was sure it would only be a day or two before everyone caught wind of the news. Every time he passed a fellow worker in the warehouse, or out in the plaza, he could feel an unspoken scolding or judgment just waiting to be expressed.

Meanwhile, the pressure continued to build, and it wasn't merely the pregnancy thing. Late in the week, Richard had a moment alone in front of the mirror in his grandparents' living room, and he noticed the subtle changes in his body, the manifestations of Sigler's new Kiengiri diet. His muscles seemed bigger and more defined. His body fat was being skimmed away an ounce at a time, the new diet chiseling away at his outer layers, molding him into the perfect little worker machine.

He was more than a little self-conscious as he went up to the roof, handed Karla his laundry, and joined the Hags at their table.

They pounced on him immediately.

"Let us welcome Steel Garden's newest daddy!" Eudora exclaimed.

"We had a pool going," said Magda. "See who was up to make Steel Garden's next baby. A lot of us were keen on that Anton fellow."

Richard groaned, curled up into a ball with his head tucked against his chest.

"Oh, look—we've upset him," Eudora chuckled.

"You mean *Newbie*," Welma said.

"Ah, yes—campus names. I sometimes forget protocol."

"He's retracted into his shell."

"That Newbie," said Magda. "He has about as much control over his libido as he does over his receding hairline."

"Whereas," said Eudora, "Richard's libido seems to have acquired a *humongous* appetite lately."

Richard lifted his head, finding himself unexpectedly submissive. "It shouldn't have happened." He explained about his storytelling technique—to which the Hags raised their eyebrows and looked at each other curiously.

Magda was the first to sober. She set Richard with a stern look and said, "Well, we all knew there was something more than meets the eye with that storytelling

knack of yours. Are you sure it was always stories, though?"

"Yes."

"*Every* time?"

Richard lowered his head again.

"What are you going to do?"

"That's what I was going to ask *you*."

"Alas," Eudora said, "we had no part in this particular demonstration of virility. What are you going to do?"

Richard let out an exasperated grunt. "What *can* I do? Alix's father will kill me if I even set *foot* over there."

"You could apply for family status," said Welma.

"Oh, so they can stick us in someone's apartment, like they did the White family?"

"Once the girl turns twenty-one, she will no longer be obligated to live with her parents. She would most likely move in with you."

Richard blanched. "I don't know. It's pretty crowded already, what with the Whites living with us and all."

"Still," said Magda, "there are options for new campus families—and with a new baby our food quota will go up. We'll get more rations during the weekly deliveries."

"Even if it's only space food," added Eudora, dryly.

Richard groaned again and looked away from the table. Across the rooftop, gilded sunlight was filtering through the thinning tree leaves. He thought of Alix, how lithe and incredibly cute she was. He couldn't imagine her becoming bloated, tired—swollen with his seed, his overindulgence. "That's just how the landlord wants it. Pack us even tighter, give us just enough so we can keep on cranking out the babies, making more future workers."

Eudora reached out and stroked his cheek. "Fact of life, little man: You shouldn't have been sticking your wee-wee into exciting new places if you weren't ready to accept the possible consequences."

Richard sighed. "You three aren't any help at all."

The Hags let him mope quietly for a few minutes. When he felt someone gently tugging at his hair, he looked up and saw Jenna standing over him.

"Where's Mrs. Foster?" she asked.

Richard looked around the rooftop, realized he hadn't seen Mrs. Foster on the way up. True, she'd been less-than-vibrant lately, but it wasn't her style to not show up at all.

"I'll go stop by her apartment," Richard said, eager for a breather.

He left the roof. Downstairs, the breezeway was quiet. There was a guard, but he hardly made any noise at all as he maintained a slow pace, his uniform soaked with sweat. Richard stepped along, his bare feet making light slapping noises against the concrete. A slight breeze—hot, but not entirely unwelcome—tousled his hair. It was a small comfort, but in light of the Hags' gruff approach to his fatherly dilemma, it relaxed him enough that he decided he would sit with Mrs.

Foster, ask her advice. Then, maybe, he could work up the courage to face Gramma with the news.

He knocked twice before twisting the knob and stepping inside. The apartment was stuffy. Taking a quick visual survey the living room, he understood why: all the windows were closed.

"Mrs. Foster?" he called, stepping toward the bedroom door, forgetting his manners as he passed through the threshold—and there she was, laying fully-dressed on her bed with her arms crossed over her chest. At first he thought she was merely sleeping, but then he realized her eyes were open, unblinking, staring at the ceiling.

Dead.

Richard stumbled backward, colliding with a stack of books—one of many that started toppling over in a domino effect. In a moment, the entire room was reduced to a cloud of dust and pages, and all the while, through all the noise and Richard's yelps of surprise and horror, there was Mrs. Foster, laying still as a statue in her bed, the most serene expression on her face.

# Chapter 23

There was no funeral. Mrs. Foster's body was shipped off-campus for processing, her apartment cleaned out, neighbors questioned in an offhand manner. As somber as it was, her death meant that the Whites now had a home of their own. They left the Doroschenkos without much of a goodbye.

Nina and Karla wanted to organize a service in Mrs. Foster's honor. However, no one besides Richard, Juju, the Hags, and the girls themselves spoke to each other anymore, so a moment of silence between laundry duties was about as much as they managed.

The rooftop abode suffered. Without Mrs. Foster's touch, the plants seemed uninterested in braving the heat. Within a matter of days, everything was wilted, brown, such a blatant reminder of death that Richard and Juju eventually gave in and hauled the larger pots off the roof. Now, instead of leafy foliage offering shade, there was a tarp. The effect was obnoxious: there was the smell of heated plastic in the air and a feeling of unspoken dread as everyone tried to glean the slightest bit of enjoyment out of their milkshakes, candy bars, and video feeds.

It wasn't working.

Richard held on for nearly a week, pretending (like the others) that he was actually enjoying himself whenever he went up to the roof—but when the Hags' presence became erratic, when even Juju stopped showing up, he knew it was pointless to continue holding on to something that was no more.

That was why the following Wednesday, after work, he washed his own work clothes, hung them to dry on the line, and went straight to Juju's.

Juju was sitting in the middle of his living room and tinkering with a collection of old, decrepit factory bot parts. When he saw Richard, he snorted and mumbled a quick hello.

"This is what you've been doing with your free time?" asked Richard, folding his arms.

"Beats what you've got going on upstairs," said Juju.

"So, you're not coming up to the roof ever again?"

Juju shook his head. "No. Unless the ladies need some help with the laundry and whatnot, I'm not going to show my puss up there anymore."

Richard said, "It's too painful for you, so you're just going to hole up here in this hotbox from now on."

Juju scowled at him. "You know everything, don't you?"

"I know a lot," Richard replied, missing Juju's sarcasm. He nodded at the bot's exposed innards. "Are you building yourself a wife?"

"If only it were that simple. This is just busywork."

"And Klug is okay with you taking apart one of his mechanical helpers?"

Juju scowled once again. "This thing's power supply crapped out yesterday. Corrupted the memory. Now it's just scrap metal, really, but it's all here, even the flash drive, the bot's entire brain—alien issue, though. I can tinker all I want and the Steel Garden administration doesn't have to worry about me reprogramming my own little army of robots because they know I don't understand the first thing about Kiengiri software."

"It can't be that hard," Richard said.

"You're a box boy," Juju said. "You handle shuttle parts all day, but can you actually tell me how to *build* a shuttle?"

Richard shrugged, supposed he couldn't.

"A bot is a microcosm for our society, then, isn't it? Each piece is as useless as the next...but when you put them together..."

There was a lump forming in Richard's throat. "My girlfriend's pregnant."

"So I heard," Juju replied.

"What do you think?"

"I think a lot of drama has gone down this month—now is certainly not the best time to be bringing a child into the world. I mean, *really*, Richard."

Richard glared at Juju and prepared a barrage of responses, retorts—affirmations that he knew what he was doing with himself, that he had a plan. Instead, he crumpled in Juju's arms and burst into tears.

Juju held him, not saying anything until he was through, at which point he pulled back, held him by the shoulders.

"Look, kiddo," Juju said, his expression softening. "These things happen. It may not be the most eloquent way to go, but you're going to be a daddy. That's more important than trying to analyze any mistakes you might have made leading up to such an eventuality."

Some of the pressure off, Richard sniffed and found he was able to compose himself. "You're right...the idea of bringing a child into *this*." He wrung his hands. "I thought I knew what Steel Garden was about. You told me all along, but I never listened. We've all been living in a prison. Now I'm going to bring someone else into this world, a brand-new worker-child to add to the Garden's roster."

"The truth sucks, doesn't it?" Juju sighed.

"It's a never-ending cycle. Everything is contained here in the Garden. No one in or out—we make our own employees. It's what the landlords want. A renewable workforce."

"Shameful."

"But it's not working anymore. People are getting upset, they're not being treated fairly. If there's another riot, it's not going to be as simple as it was when the food truck came."

"I agree."

"No, really," said Richard. He considered what the Hags had told him. For some reason they'd demanded total confidentiality—as if they weren't sure Juju (or

anyone else, for that matter) could be trusted with such information. Or maybe they didn't want anyone to panic prematurely. Maybe, he thought, they wanted as many people as possible to live happily in the last waning moments before Armageddon, in much the same way Richard had gone his whole life thinking of Steel Garden as *home*. Still, to keep the secret would be counterproductive—

"Do you have some insight into the matter?" Juju asked, releasing Richard and returning to his tinkering.

"The Hags told me there's going to be a revolt before the end of the month."

Juju set his screwdriver down, looked at Richard. "Really? Is there a specific date?"

"I don't know."

"Who's organizing it—or are we supposed to automatically run amok on such-and-such day at the end of the month?"

"I think it's being organized behind the scenes," Richard said. "I keep seeing people all over campus talking in whispers, but I guess not everyone's part of it."

Juju shuffled through a pile of screws. "Nice to know the building majority has decided it's unnecessary for the likes of us to be included in their plans."

"I guess without Mrs. Foster to keep things mellow, the workers are taking matters into their own hands."

"I think this would have happened regardless," Juju said.

Richard went to the window and looked out into the plaza. "They said there were no drugs in her bloodstream. There was no evidence of foul play."

Juju said, "They'll be dancing around the cause of death for months."

"It's obvious, though," Richard said. "She died of a broken heart."

* * *

Back home, Gramma asked Richard if everything was all right.

"It doesn't matter," he said. "Nothing matters if it all leads to death anyway, right?"

Gramma sighed and gestured for Richard to join her at the breakfast table. "It matters."

Richard took a seat, rested his head against the tabletop. "You can't prove it."

"It *matters*," Gramma said. "Five, ten, fifteen, fifty years from now you'll have the chance to walk into a room full of strangers and make them your friends with nothing more than a few words. You'll be able to share your pain, make others aware of what Steel Garden once was, who lived and worked here, and, most importantly, *why*. You'll be able to pass on the story."

"I haven't told a story in...forever."

"You will. And after you, your children, their children too, will pass the stories down. This place will have turned to dust, but its essence will live on."

"You're just saying that to make me feel better."

Gramma reached across the table and grasped Richard's hand. "Can you blame me? It's been so crazy around here, and you've kept such a straight face through

everything...if anyone deserves better, it's you."

Richard felt the tears trickling down his cheek. "I miss the way things were."

"Oh, Richard," Gramma whispered. "It couldn't last forever. The good old days were just figments of our imaginations...but I too miss the way things were. If only it could be like in one of your stories."

Richard laughed, a brief snort of air that stung his arm. "If only."

Grampa sighed in his chair, waiting for sundown.

Waiting.

# Chapter 24

That night, Richard dreamed he paid a visit to Pacifica's Library of the World. Though he wasn't sure if such a place actually existed, it was grand nonetheless, and his breath was taken away as soon as he stepped into the large, domed cathedral. Flanked on all sides by large, arched windows that offered a fantastic view of the city, the library's interior was packed with towering, multi-tiered aisles of computer terminals. Librarians and patrons flocked about, some walking, some floating on polished, circular personal lifts, others sitting at the many terminals.

It was morning—Richard was part of a class. His hair had been cut short and combed nicely. Instead of campus-issue coveralls, he was clad in a crisp, clean school uniform. Instead of dusty work boots, he had on dress shoes, which clicked discretely against the polished floor as he stepped along with two dozen other students laughing, joking, complaining about the lousy air-conditioning (Richard didn't complain—he thought the air was nice and cool, enough to send him into a permanent daydream).

He felt a soft hand slide into his, and suddenly Alix was at his side, smiling prettily and looking utterly fetching in her skirt and sweater combination.

"Partners?" she asked, winking.

Richard didn't quite understand what she meant, but he nodded anyway, mesmerized. Looking past her, he could see outside, where Pacifica's acreage, the thousands upon thousands of buildings and skyscrapers patterned upon the Earth, lay sprawled all the way out to the ocean's glittering edge.

"Careful, Rich," Alix said, tapping his cheek. "If Mrs. Foster catches you drifting off again..."

Richard nodded, blinking and finding that the class (himself too) had seated themselves at a small cluster of glass-top tables deep in the heart of the library. Here, the ambient quiet made covert tomfoolery difficult, so the students relegated themselves to sitting with their hands folded neatly on the tabletops as Mrs. Foster addressed everyone.

"This is the Library of the World," she said. "What you'll find here is every piece of human literature ever created. Well, every piece that hasn't been lost to time and the ages, war with the Kur, and so forth. I've brought you here today as part of our continuing current events unit. We all watch the news, we all check the Internet—we all have a fair grip on what's going on in the world. But an abundance of information is useless unless you can extrapolate the key points.

"I want you to form teams of two, one team per terminal, and put together a presentation on the relevant history of the Sol Union. Presentations will be given

at 1300 hours."

Richard and Alix paired up and tucked themselves into a research terminal on one of the higher tiers. At some point during their transition, the walls and floors had become translucent, so Richard could, at times, gaze up or down along the columns, left or right along the aisles, and spy on the other students as they worked.

"Will you quit fooling around?" Alix said at random intervals as she worked on the computer.

Richard realized he'd been absentmindedly playing with a potted fern that had been placed within the terminal cubicle.

"You know I'm terrible with computers," he said.

"Maybe if you weren't always *daydreaming* it would be a little easier."

"I'm not daydreaming, I'm *dreaming*."

Alix rolled her eyes. "Oh, really?"

"Don't be so uptight," Richard said. "You're safe here inside my head."

"I don't know why I put up with you."

"Is it because you love me?" Richard pinched Alix's waist.

"Maybe."

"It is, then. Say it is." Richard kept pinching.

"*Okay*," Alix said, squirming out of reach and yet somehow managing to keep her hands on the keyboard. "I'll do the research, but you, as master storyteller, have to do all the talking during our presentation. Deal?"

"Deal," Richard said, and nuzzled her neck for a moment before she finally pushed him away and got down to business, handing him notes as she wrote them and urging him regularly to think of how he was going to present to the class.

A handful of hours passed with the blink of an eye. Richard found himself in one of the library's patio areas. He and his fellow students sat in rows on the warm concrete deck as Mrs. Foster paced back and forth with her clipboard, the vivid, cloudless blue sky spread out like an open canvas behind her, the breeze tousling a wisp of hair that had escaped from her bun. She called out the names of the first team, stood off to one side as they presented in the standard talking-head fashion. Five more teams followed, and were equally uninspired.

At long last, Richard and Alix were up; they stood, went to the head of the congregation.

Richard cleared his throat, and, raising his hand to point at the sky, said, "Before the Sol Union, before the great tsunamis that washed away the Americas and gave birth to Pacifica, there was Contact Day—the day the first Kiengiri ships appeared in the sky." Waving his arm, the patio was suddenly cloaked in an alternate scene where Mrs. Foster's students were standing amongst a fleet of government dignitaries and media personalities—the welcome committee for the delegation of Kiengiri ambassadors stepping off the platform of an enormous, saucer-shaped spacecraft.

"Tall and elegant," Richard continued, "the Kiengiri were undeniably human-like, and they brought with them the definitive answer, proof that mankind was

not alone in the universe. Moreover, it was explained that this was not the first time our world had been visited by cosmic voyagers. Language, technology—our biological design, even—had been the result of previous interactions with the Kiengiri. And now they were returning to the world they'd seeded so long ago. All religions were born anew, philosophers had fresh subject matter for their think tanks; we knew there was something more than birth, life, and death on a minuscule spinning globe. However, the mirth was short-lived, as the Kiengiri had not made their presence known merely to reminisce with the human race. There was war among the stars, and our solar system was no longer safe."

The scene shifted, and suddenly two dozen young minds were packed inside Richard's skull as he was strapped into a fighter jet, sent off into the cosmic battlefield. Though he never actually *saw* a Kur pilot, he caught glimpses here and there through the view port cameras, brief patches of ragged, coarse skin, sharp teeth, gleaming reptilian eyes.

"The Kur were a race of conquerors, snatching up all the habitable worlds they could find and disposing of whatever bothersome species happened to get in the way. Their consideration for life on Earth was nonexistent. Humans were animals —walking, talking oddities scheduled for genocide. The devastation of the old American coastlines was merely one example of the Kur's dedication to their cause.

"Yet, out of the ashes rose mighty Pacifica." Richard blinked; the class was now a bodiless entity floating high above a rapidly-developing topography of spires and towers rising out of myriad scaffolding. "Where the Kur perceived humans to be nothing more than semi-evolved primates, the Kiengiri, who'd been studying us for some time, believed in the spiritual and physiological evolution of humankind, and so opted to interact with us intellectually, instead of as a master would his pet. A deal was struck: the Kiengiri would protect our system as best they could from the Kur in exchange for our support in keeping the Kiengiri fleet functional.

"The price of war was, of course, economically and socially significant. Pacifica was as much a monument to humanity's unbreakable spirit as it was a sanctuary for our new alien allies, who needed our hospitals, our military bases, our resources. The women and children lived and worked in the city. The men fought in the battlefield or worked in the factories.

"Laws were passed, social schemes reformed, and overnight Earth was transformed into the homeland of the Sol Union. In the space of twenty years, over a billion human soldiers—and nearly three times that many Kiengiri—were sent into space to fight the Kur. The results were detrimental to the Kur, whose forces were trimmed back steadily over the years. However, Earth's major cities were still targets.

"So, the campus system was initiated, putting medical, agricultural, and manufacturing facilities off the grid in a decentralized fashion. This was also touted as a solution to the problem of overpopulation—many destitute and lower-class citizens now had a job and a home.

"Life on post-contact Earth was hard, but not without reward. As per their agreement, the Kiengiri shared a great deal of their scientific advancements with us,

and, most notably, removed the last stumbling blocks preventing the widespread deployment of nanotech. This meant limitless potential. Suddenly anything could be cured, anything built, anything fabricated. We worked harder, but we lived longer, and we were healthier."

Richard waved his hand, and the library patio reasserted itself around Mrs. Foster's class. "The question can still be asked, though: Have we sold ourselves short for the benefit of knowledge, of companionship? Were it not for the Kiengiri, would we be where we are today? Would we *be* at all? And supposing the Kur had gotten to us first, would we have had any possibility of striking a deal like we had with the Kiengiri?"

Leaving the question as a rhetoric, Richard nodded at Alix and stepped out of the way as Mrs. Foster addressed the class:

"Interesting mix of political and social commentary, Mr. Doroschenko. Lots of imagery." She didn't seem overwhelmed by his presentation, but neither was she underwhelmed.

"We'll get four and a half marks," Richard said, sitting beside Alix and smiling broadly.

Alix said something, started moving closer to him, but her words were hollow, her features suddenly blurred—the patio was fading away, the library walls smearing into plaster and brick. Richard blinked and found himself laying in bed, stifled and sweaty and letting out one last breath of air-conditioned air from an uncommonly vivid dream.

Darn, he thought. He'd really been looking forward to getting his grade.

# Chapter 25

With Mrs. Foster gone, there was no longer any excuse for Sigler to keep the Ferrera sisters around, and so they were shipped out Thursday morning. Richard didn't realize what had happened until, after work, he stepped onto the roof and saw the Hags' table empty.

"Oh, Richard, there was nothing we could do," Nina said, trying to comfort him. "They brought guards with them—they wouldn't listen to us."

Richard pushed her away. Grasping his head in his hands, he let out a desperate cry before sinking to his knees and blinking almost maniacally at his surroundings. There was nothing left, he thought. Nothing but a dusty rooftop, dying plants in cracked pots, a pathetic group of exhausted-looking grunts standing around him and wondering if he'd lost his wits to the heat, the pressure.

He fled, running from the rooftop, taking the stairs two at a time. His legs flexed of their own accord, carrying him over sand and concrete, all the way to building B.

To Alix's apartment.

He didn't care if Mr. Campos hated him; he had to see Alix. The world was happening around him, and he felt as if he wasn't a part of it anymore, as if he hadn't the slightest say what happened from day to day—he needed to change that. He needed to know that his reason for being wasn't just so that he could observe from afar.

Alix's bedroom was empty. Richard went around into the plaza and found her there with the women. They were doing their laundry.

Before Alix could protest, Richard rushed forward and captured her in his arms, embracing her as, he imagined, a bold lover would.

He said, "I don't care what you say or do, I'm not going to leave you—not even if your dad kills me! I'll find a way to come back as a ghost or something! He can't stop us from being together!"

Alix sighed, blushing, looking over her shoulder at her mother, the other women, then back at Richard. "*Richard*, what are you doing?"

"Standing up for myself—for *us*."

"Oh, you don't understand, do you?" She touched his cheek.

"I understand plenty."

"Then you know it's better this way."

Richard was incredulous. "How can you say that?"

"Because I know my dad. He's not the type to simply calm down after awhile, especially if it's something like *this*."

Mrs. Campos stepped forward, a worried look on her face. “Please, just go. We’ll take care of her.”

Richard ignored her, kept himself focused on Alix. “You’re turning on me.”

“I am *not*,” Alix replied, scowling.

“Then why won’t you stand up for yourself—for us?”

“It’s a lot more complicated than that. You wouldn’t understand.”

“I’m a man now, you know.”

Alix separated herself from Richard. “Oh, so now you’re going to start talking down to me?”

“Sorry,” Richard said.

“I know.” Alix took his hand and led him to the far end of the plaza. There, she held his face in her hands and looked him straight in the eye. “Let’s say you love someone so much that you couldn’t stand to see them hurt themselves if they ever thought they’d lost you.”

There was pain in Alix’s eyes; Richard knew she was talking about her father. Even so, he asked, “What about me? I love you too.”

“I know you do, and I love you too…but I also love my father. Having to choose between the two of you is tearing me apart, don’t you know that?”

“You’ve chosen him, then.”

“I’ve chosen *you*. I’ve chosen *us*.”

“You sure have a funny way of showing it.”

Alix let him go, folded her arms. “You know, the other girls used to play dirty games with the boys. I was curious, but I waited—for you. You were the only one I ever got with *that way*. I’m having your baby. Even though my dad’s probably going to have a heart attack over it, even though I’m scared to death of becoming a mother…I’m having your baby.”

Richard’s frustration abated; he placed his hand against Alix’s stomach. “Is it a boy or a girl?”

Alix shrugged. “How should I know?”

“What do you *think* it will be?”

Alix started to answer in a wise-cracking sort of way, but stopped suddenly, tensing. “Oh, God,” she breathed.

Richard followed her gaze and saw Mr. Campos stepping into the plaza. Whether or not it was physically possible, the man literally sparked with rage as he rapidly closed the distance between himself and Richard.

Despite Alix’s yelling for him to run, Richard stood his ground, fists clenched at his sides as he stared Mr. Campos down. There was a madness coursing through him.

He said, “Mr. Campos was ready for blood, coming at me fast as a lightning bolt—but I wasn’t going to run away this time. No, this time *I* was going to be the affirmative one.” He held up his hand. “I knew there was power in suggestion—so I suggested that Mr. Campos calm down.”

As Richard spoke, Mr. Campos’s motions slowed and became less aggressive. He came to a stumbling halt a few feet away from Richard. His eyes were glazed

over.

"Rest," Richard said. "Right here, on the ground...rest."

Mr. Campos wavered on his feet, fell to his knees, his head rolling to one side as he muttered sleepily to himself. In a moment he was laying spread out on the ground and snoring loudly.

Alix, her mother—every other person in the plaza—gawked in disbelief.

Richard winked at Alix, held out his hand. "I've bought us some time. Want to go for a walk?"

Stepping past him, Alix knelt beside her father. "Is he okay?"

"He's just sleeping it off," Richard replied. "When he wakes up, he won't remember a thing."

Mrs. Campos stepped forward. "But...but how did you do this?"

Richard shrugged. "I made him part of my story."

Everyone exchanged glances; a few of the women whispered to each other while nodding in Richard's direction.

Mrs. Campos started lifting her husband by the armpits. "Help me bring him inside."

Richard frowned, but helped Mrs. Campos carry her husband into their apartment and lay him on his cot.

Facing Richard, Mrs. Campos said, "I don't appreciate this sort of thing."

"But I thought—"

"He's *my* husband, Richard. I don't agree with everything he does, but neither do I think it's right to simply treat him as a toy with an on and off switch."

"Sorry, ma'am," Richard said, lowering his head. "I just wanted to help."

"How long will he be like this?"

"A little while—ten minutes, maybe. I didn't mean for him to become a vegetable or anything."

Mrs. Campos sighed. "I know, but...this isn't something we're going to work out overnight. It's going to take time. For now, it's probably best if you left. Before he wakes up."

Alix led Richard from the apartment. Outside, at the edge of the plaza, she said, "*I* appreciate what you did. Sometimes my dad just needs to *relax* for a while. My mom tries too hard to be the mediator—but it would be so cool if she had an on-off switch for him!"

"Maybe not as cool as I'd first thought. At least, not to your mother."

"Well, an interesting idea, anyway. But look, before I go...did you stop by for a reason, or did you just want to cause some mayhem?"

"I want you to live with me," Richard said, clasping Alix's hands in his own. "I want us to get married. I can apply for a job in the city."

"You can't do that, can you?"

Richard shrugged. "Why not?"

"No one's ever left the Garden. Once you're here, you're here for good."

"It's not a prison," Richard said. "Besides, the war could end any day."

"Still, we don't make money here. We'd be destitute if we went into the city."

"But there's always a demand for workers, right? They *have* to have programs for people like us, people willing to support the Union—"

Alix cut him off with a gentle punch in the belly. "Quit daydreaming, Richard. Don't you think if that were possible our parents would have done so long ago?"

"That's the problem with all you people," Richard snapped. "You just let things happen."

"*You people*?" Alix rolled her eyes. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"It *means*," growled Richard, "that I'm trying to come up with ideas to help the two of us, and all you want to do is just subsist like all the rest of the campus grunts. Take the easy road."

Alix punched him again, only this time she wasn't being playful. "Come back when you're not so irritable."

She walked away.

Richard returned to his building. In the bedroom, he lay on his cot and thought how funny it was that not a month ago, *he* was the one who'd merely wanted everyone to *be*—and now that he understood what it was Juju had been trying to drill into his head, it didn't seem to matter one way or the other.

# Chapter 26

Richard woke early on Saturday morning, showered, and went for a walk along the Garden perimeter. As hard as he tried to imagine Kur soldiers, all sleek and serpentine, sneaking between the sandy hillsides, it always turned out to be a mirage. There was nothing outside the campus. There never was, and there never would be. There might be a war going on, but it was between Earth's own—landlords keeping grunts for cheap labor, politicians using fabrications of war to further their careers.

There was no proof to the contrary.

Yesterday, he'd gone up to the roof and waited his turn at the bigscreen so he could surf the news feeds. He'd spent hours examining the media slant and putting together a mental status report on the Sol War, and he was convinced most of it was bogus: dignitaries shaking hands with other dignitaries, signing meaningless pieces of paper, delivering cookie-cutter speeches, making empty promises—people tightening their belts for no apparent reason.

Richard wanted out. Out of the campus, out of the joke.

He went to the records office. This time it was a sleepy-looking forty-something who ushered him into his cubicle. The nameplate read: GIBBONS.

"How can I help you?" asked Gibbons.

"Let's say I want to leave Steel Garden," Richard said. "How would I go about doing that?"

Gibbons swallowed the wrong way, started to choke. "That would be... complicated."

"Why?"

"Because, well, there are rules, guidelines."

"That's not an answer."

Gibbons reached for his water bottle, took a good, long swig. Then: "I'm going to have to scan your tag."

Richard let him do so, and in a moment his file was glowing on Gibbons' computer screen.

After a moment, Gibbons said, "I don't see your profile flagged anywhere."

"Flagged?"

"Yes—usually the landlord will put a note in someone's file if they warrant special attention."

"Do I need to go through Sigler first, then?"

"Well, no, he wouldn't have the authority to clear you anyway—it has to do with whether or not you've repaid your debt to society."

"But I've committed no crime," Richard insisted. "The reasons for people to be sent here have to do with the laws they've broken in the city, right? I've broken no laws—unless the system is designed for us children to work off our parents' debts? Is that it?"

"Well, no," said Gibbons. "I mean...it's true, children born here are sort of in a gray area, but regardless, there's a waiting list, forms to be filled out before you become eligible for review—"

"So, it's possible?"

Gibbons sighed. "Look, you seem like a nice kid, so I'm going to be honest with you. The campus system is built around people staying put. Workers who come here are on a one-way trip—the city doesn't like to deal with lower-class folk. Transfer forms are a formality, one of the many loopholes to keep the campus system legal. I've worked in the system for nearly twenty years, and I can honestly tell you I've never seen a transfer go through. It just isn't done."

Richard pouted. He wanted to concoct a feat of words that would somehow resolve things, perhaps spur Gibbons to hack into the system using his computer, but Richard's tongue hardened in his throat and formed a lump that was impossible to swallow—and so he was only able to nod or shake his head obediently as Gibbons went on about protocol. When he was done, he handed Richard a stack of printouts to take home.

"I can't guarantee anything, but here's the paperwork anyway."

Richard left the office and returned to his apartment. He sat with the forms spread out over the breakfast table and tried his best to read the fine print—he only understood half the words, though. If only he'd studied more diligently with Mrs. Foster!

After a while, Gramma came over to him. "What's all this?" she asked, nodding at the paperwork.

"Nothing," Richard replied, deciding against asking for assistance, for even if he filled everything out properly, he already knew the Garden administration's attitude would be less than efficient, if not downright uncooperative.

He rested his head on the tabletop and came to the conclusion that he was a dullard, a Garden grunt, all muscle and no mind, no ingenious way to improve his situation. His spirit had soared so high in the plaza with Alix, but even then the result hadn't been satisfactory—and after the fact, he was unable to keep from reverting to his more primitive form. As much as he wanted the Garden to be something more, this was all there was: the table, the walls, the floor, Grampa slowly wasting away in his chair, Richard's child-to-be eagerly assembling itself inside Alix's womb in preparation for the day it too could putter about in utter monotony.

# Chapter 27

Picture Day, for those who cared, was on the last Sunday of the month.

Richard stood straight in the middle of the living room and grimaced as Gramma fiddled with his hair, straightened his collar—tried to prepare him for his portrait. It didn't help that he was being ornery.

"I'm not going unless you go, too," he said, folding his arms.

Gramma sighed in exasperation. "For goodness' sake, Richard, do this one little thing for me and I won't bug you for the rest of the year."

"How about *you* do this for *me*, and I won't bug *you* for the rest of the year?"

"Don't be tart, Richard."

Richard frowned, bit his lip, and though he acquiesced, it was not before he gave Gramma the mother of all scowls.

"Good." Gramma pecked him on the cheek and sent him out the door.

The photographers' shuttle was parked just inside the main gate. There wasn't much of a line. It was mainly a handful of families from Richard's building, parents who felt it necessary to immortalize their children amidst Steel Garden's decadence. Squirt was there, and the Peterson girls. Everyone had been scrubbed clean and combed neat.

When it came Richard's turn, he stepped inside the shuttle, let one of the two rather comely female photographers scan his tag.

"Excellent, Richard," she said, smiling brilliantly. "My name's Eva, and this is my assistant, Petra."

Richard waved.

"Go ahead and get changed. When you're ready, we'll do hair and makeup."

There was a wardrobe in the back, sectioned off by a folding screen. Richard stepped behind the screen and perused the offerings, finding very little that inspired him (after all, he'd had precious little time as a child to acquire a fashion sense before the dress code was enforced). He settled on a white dress shirt and a pair of slacks, then stepped back into the shooting area, the clothes twisting and flexing subtly as they conformed to the shape of his body.

"You have such nice hair," Eva said, setting him on a stool and dabbing at his face with a sponge. "How long have you been growing it out?"

"Not long," Richard replied. He hadn't realized until now that he'd inadvertently skipped his last few haircuts.

Eva frowned. "You've got a dark spot under your eye. Did you have an accident?"

Richard remembered that he was still slightly bruised from his encounter with

Mr. Campos. He said, "Yeah. I was hoping it would be all healed by now."

"Well, I think we can work a little magic so that it won't show up in your photo." Eva winked and worked on his face for another minute or so before turning the mirror so he could see. "There we go. Good as new."

Richard blinked at his reflection. Makeup wasn't his thing, and he knew as soon as he was back in the plaza he was going to wash his face thoroughly, but he was pleased to see that the remnants of his black eye had been cleverly concealed.

"Wow—how did you do that?" he asked.

"It's a trade secret," Eva responded. She turned to Petra. "He's ready."

Richard didn't much feel like taking pictures, but since Eva had been so helpful, he decided he would keep his contention to a minimum. At Eva and Petra's instruction, he turned this way and that, held, dimpled, and held some more for the camera. Afterward, when Eva showed him the photos to choose from, he selected his favorite, thanked the ladies for their service, and stepped outside again, thinking it hadn't been that bad—Gramma would be pleased, at least.

He returned home and showed her his portrait. She told him that he looked very handsome and that she would hang the picture up on the wall.

The rest of the afternoon was quiet, slow, excruciatingly still. Grampa rested in his armchair; Gramma sat at the breakfast table and did nothing; Richard lay on his cot and stared up at the ceiling as the beads of sweat ran down his cheeks and forehead. He felt the day stretch itself, and he knew it was going to go on and on for years, decades. The once-comforting routine of Sunday in the Garden was now stifling. Terrifying, almost. Richard kept thinking of himself, fifty years into the future, old and gray and decrepit, laying right here, the stagnant nature of the Garden having seeped into the very fabric of his being so that he couldn't care less if he lived or died. No action, no movement, no point. There had been talk of a revolt, but the month was up, and nothing had changed, no one had manifested their silent screams for change.

Richard sat up, swung his legs over the side of the cot, sat gripping the mattress edge as he stared at the wall.

"Nothing ever changes," he rasped, grinding his teeth, unaware that he was talking out loud until he heard his own words reverberating against the walls.

Something has to give, he thought. Something has to *start*.

Quietly, he said, "It began with an explosion—"

—he clamped his hands over his mouth, tightened his gut, but it was already too late. The lazy afternoon silence was interrupted by a loud *boom!* followed by the sound of debris raining down just outside the Doroschenkos' apartment. Then: screaming, shouting—chaos.

Richard jumped out of bed and ran into the living room, where Gramma was shuffling wide-eyed to the front window.

"Oh my God," she gasped as she pulled the curtain aside.

"What is it?" asked Richard, starting toward her, already sure of what was happening outside but too afraid to admit it.

Gramma stepped away from the window, grabbed Richard by the shoulders.

"Get dressed."

"But—"

"They're throwing firebombs—get dressed now!"

Already the air was tinged with the smell of acrid smoke. Richard darted back into the bedroom, pulled on coveralls and boots, and was back in the living room in time to see Gramma shoving open the rear window.

"Hurry!" she cried, beckoning to him. "Out the back way—stay on the fringes, out of sight." She thrust a water bottle into his hand. "Look for a way out, a hole in the fence, the gate opening for Parsons' men—go west."

"But what about you guys?" he asked, noting that Grampa was still in his chair, oblivious to the whole ordeal.

There was another explosion in the plaza, this time close enough to rattle Richard's bones; thick black smoke blew in through the front window.

"I'll take care of your grandfather—but you need to go now!"

Richard started through the window, stopped halfway. "I'll bring Juju—"

"No, Richard," Gramma said. "You need to get away from here!"

Already Richard could hear angry voices, glass shattering near the front door. "But you'll die!" he cried.

"*Go, now!*" shouted Gramma, her voice louder and more demanding than Richard had ever heard as she pushed him the rest of the way out. He stumbled onto his hands and knees, forced himself up and around to face the window, to demand that Gramma stop being so stubborn—

—the blast caught him completely by surprise. One instant, there she was, a slow-motion visage smiling sadly at him; the next, she was framed by fire. There was barely enough time to react as the heat exploded through the window, knocking Richard to the ground. He rolled twice, covered his head with his hands as splintered wood and shattered glass rained down on him. When he looked up again, his vision was blurred by tears, and there was sand caking his cheeks.

Gramma...Grampa...

Richard shuddered uncontrollably for a moment before instinct took over and he was gone from the window, running along the perimeter of building A. When he reached one of the plaza entrances, he peeked inside and witnessed a surreal scene: Neighbors he'd known all his life were running and jumping and climbing on things, setting them on fire, punching and kicking at each other; there were wounded guards on the floor, wounded residents, smoke in the air—

—he had to get to Alix. Receding from the madness, he made his way to the southern end of the building. As he was psyching himself up to make the mad dash across the sand field, he remembered Juju, whose apartment was just around the corner.

Intent on avoiding the plaza at all costs, Richard went around to the back of the building again and found Juju's window. The glass had already been shattered, and there were scorch marks around the frame. He looked inside—

"Juju!" he cried, shoving the window open and climbing through.

The air was heavy with smoke. Juju was laying on the floor beside his cot, his

body badly burned, his limbs twisted in all the wrong ways. It looked as if he'd been napping when the explosion had occurred—the situation was about as bad as could be; Richard had to fight to keep from freaking out completely.

"Oh, Juju!" he cried, kneeling at Juju's side. "I'm sorry, I'm so sorry I did it! I was bored and upset and I started telling a story but I wasn't careful and I made this whole mess happen and I'm sorry, I'm sorry!"

Juju's eyes fluttered open, and he grimaced. "What in blazes are you talking about—stop babbling and pull yourself together!"

"Yes, sir," Richard said, wiping his face. "I'm sorry, sorry—"

Juju coughed loudly. "Shh. Listen...I'm pretty beat up now, don't know how long I've got—"

"But Juju—"

"*Listen*! You've got to leave, run for safety...your girl too. Don't know how Parsons and his cronies will react to something like this."

Everything was happening so quickly, Richard's mind couldn't keep up. He half-listened to Juju as he started lifting the man by the armpits.

"Ow, *ouch*—stop, goddamnit!" Juju growled.

Richard set him down.

"Leave me! *Go*, you imbecile!"

"But Juju, I can carry you—"

"No you can't! Now get lost before it's too late!"

"We'll find someone, a medic—"

"Goddamnit, Richard! Don't make this harder than it has to be!" Juju started coughing blood, and for a moment it looked like he was done for, but then he calmed down, reached up with a shaky arm to pat Richard on the shoulder. "Rich...I never wanted kids of my own, but you..." It was obvious he was having a hard time getting the words out, both because of the subject matter involved and because of his physical wounds, but he managed it. "I always considered you to be the son I never had."

"Oh, Juju..."

Juju lay back again, stared up at the ceiling, his breath coming in uneven gasps. "Now, please...go."

Richard got to his feet, started toward the window.

"Richard."

Richard glanced over his shoulder.

"Make sure you get my character right when you tell the story."

Richard nodded. "I will."

Then he was gone, out the window, into the hellfire. The Sunday afternoon was prematurely aged, tainted by screams and rifle charges ringing in his ears, smoke and ash clouding his vision—which was just as well, because he was crying again. He didn't know where to go, what to do. So, he made his way back to building A's southern tip. There, he saw that the walkway leading to building B was congested with frantic soldiers, a few bloodied residents in handcuffs.

He started toward the perimeter fence, intending to make his way to Alix in a

roundabout fashion. A few dozen steps along the way, he spotted a huge gash in the chainlink—

—an unchecked avenue of escape.

He came to a stop and hefted his water bottle, considering his options, how far he could make it on foot. Juju had been gone for an entire afternoon and had not found anything. Pacifica *was* west, but how far, he had no way of knowing. Maybe Juju had been a few hours off, maybe a few days.

He stood frozen for a moment, torn between two courses of action—then, quite shamefully, he took off his coveralls, his boots, his dog tag, and ducked through the fence, fleeing westward through sand and dust, into the sunset for as far as his legs would carry him.

"I'm sorry, Alix!" he cried, over and over, until his face was crusted with tears.

At last, when daylight was but a speck of light on the horizon, he collapsed, out of breath, wheezing. His feet were raw, his body caked with dust, his throat parched. He faced the east and saw a minuscule orange smudge pressed against the distant dark: the glowing embers of what was left of Steel Garden. No emergency shuttles, no flurries of bots scouring the area for stragglers, no media coverage...just a memory fading into the night.

Richard took a long swig from his bottle. After resting for a few minutes, he got to his feet and turned his back on the Garden. He had no survival skills whatsoever. Wandering the desert in his underwear and with hardly any water, he was probably no better off than he would have been had he stayed on campus.

Turn back, he thought. Face your responsibility—you made the mess, now clean it up.

He started walking, kept a steady pace for another hour or so. When it became so dark that he started tripping every other step, he decided to make camp, and lay curled up on his side on the ground. He considered telling himself a story in which he had supplies, a tent—but the power of his words frightened him. Somehow it wasn't just stories anymore. He'd had a notion in times past, little bits of unexplained phenomenon here and there, but Gramma's medication, Alix's pregnancy, and, now, the revolt...it seemed as he grew up, so did his storytelling ability grow from playful make-believe to hardcore reality.

However, rolling onto his back, looking up into the sky and seeing the stars, millions and millions of them, filling the nighttime void, he managed an ounce of hope. Unhindered by the campus lights, the cosmic vista was too magnificent to be left to chance, and suddenly Richard knew that he was part of something much larger and much more intricate than he could ever hope to fathom. All that space —of *course* there was room for the Kiengiri and the Kur, the good and the bad. There was also room for Richard, for Juju, Gramma and Grampa, Mrs. Foster and the Hags, Nina, Karla, Miranda, and Lily, Chad and Megan and Jenna—the world needed grunts as well as spacemen; he'd merely been born into the former category instead of the latter.

"I'm sorry," he whispered to anyone, body or soul, who might have been listening. It had taken billions of years to set the stage on which he now walked,

and here he was, barely a couple of decades into his own minuscule existence and already sure he knew what it was all about.

The truth: He wasn't sure he knew anything at all.

He rolled onto his side again, closed his eyes. Sleep came in fitful bursts. Every time something crawled over his leg, he jolted awake, jumped up to shake himself off, and then set himself back down several feet away.

It was during one of these cycles that he noticed a flickering light emanating a little further to the west. It was dim, close to the ground—a campfire, Richard realized.

Now quite wide awake, he crept in for a closer look.

# Chapter 28

The man was tall, dark-haired, solidly built, and, despite a number of rather nasty-looking wounds weeping between makeshift bandages, strikingly handsome. Richard watched him for several minutes from his hiding spot behind the scorched shell of a fighter jet. It appeared the man was a soldier and had crashed here not too long ago—perhaps during a skirmish.

At first, not much happened. The soldier sat leaning against a rock as he ate a small meal, drank from a canteen tied around the waist of his tattered uniform. Then, setting down the canteen, he turned, looked directly at where Richard was crouching, and uttered a string of unintelligible words followed by what sounded like a laugh.

Richard flinched, squashed himself down into the shadows. The soldier spoke again, and Richard bit his knuckles, wondering what to do now that he'd been discovered. Though he couldn't understand the words, the man's intonation didn't sound unfriendly—and besides, filthy as Richard was, he probably looked a lot more like a crazed savage than a hungry, frightened campus worker. That could work to his advantage.

He exposed himself, stepping cautiously into the campfire light.

The soldier reached out a hand, beckoned for him to step closer. At first Richard thought he needed help standing, but as soon as he grasped the man's hand—

*Human?*

Richard jolted backward several steps. The word "human" had sounded inside his head, a thought that hadn't been his own.

The soldier laughed, a clear, lyrical sound, and beckoned for Richard to join him again.

This time, when the man spoke, Richard didn't break physical contact.

*Young one—please excuse the intrusion, but I do not speak your language. However, we may communicate with each other through mental metaphor, if you do not mind.*

"Are you European?" Richard asked (verbally, since he hadn't the slightest idea how to speak without using his mouth), and knelt at the soldier's side.

The soldier laughed again. *No, I come from a much farther place*. He nodded at the sky. *My name is Ben*.

"Richard," replied Richard. "Are you...an alien?"

*I am not of this world, yes.*

"Then you must be Kiengiri, because you don't look like a Kur...even though

I've never seen a Kur before. Not really."

*We may have to translate certain metaphors with our communication, but yes, I am 'good.' At least, I have always thought I was good.*

Richard frowned.

*What is it, young one?*

"Oh, nothing important," Richard said. "I just thought maybe an alien would have a name that sounded more...*alien*."

Ben chuckled. *If my name sounds plain to you, it is because of your brain's translation.*

Richard nodded.

*So, you are human,* said Ben. *They say your kind is a provocative mix, animal and angel combined. There are pictures in our textbooks, but I must admit the effect is lost entirely. I have never seen a human, not in the flesh.*

"And I've never seen any of you before," Richard said, unable to keep from gawking. The more he looked, the more he noticed the subtle differences between himself and Ben: eyes with unusually large pupils, skin completely hairless and glimmering with a sheen of something not quite like moisture, proportions a little too elongated. It was a shame Ben was so banged up.

Richard glanced around the camp. "Did you crash here? Are you waiting for someone to pick you up?"

Ben shook his head and sighed. *I am a soldier. When one of us goes down, he goes down alone. We are given suicide tablets, but I could not bring myself to take one. Not yet. As long as I can hold off infection...I wish to collect my thoughts before I cross the ultimate divide.*

A grim sort of satisfaction passed through Richard—Ben's emotions, he realized.

*And you?* asked Ben. *What has brought you to roam about the desert in such a state, and without companionship?*

"There was a worker campus," Richard said, glancing eastward over his shoulder and feeling a sharp pang in his gut. "We built shuttle parts. I lived there until yesterday. There was a huge revolt. People were breaking things, hurting each other. It was my fault."

*Oh, I doubt that, young one.*

"No, really. I was impatient—I couldn't see the war with my own eyes, so I didn't believe it was real. I thought we were just being kept out of the way, made to do all the grunt work because...because...well, I don't know, but I guess now that I've met you, it all has to be true, what they tell us on the news." Richard trailed off, felt tears moistening his cheek. "I wish I hadn't done it."

*Done what?*

"I...I tell stories. Sometimes they come true. It's supposed to be a gift, but I got mad yesterday. I wanted something to happen, so I *made* something happen. I didn't mean for anyone to get hurt."

*Perhaps, then,* said Ben, *you merely inspired the people to express the feelings they already had. Civil unrest is often a long and complicated process. It is not uncommon*

*for sentient history to repeat itself in periods of calm and conflict, pressure building and being released and then building all over again.*

Richard shrugged, unconvinced. "At least you knew what it was about. You had something to fight for."

Ben shook his head. *The fight, for me, is over. There is great compartmentalization amongst Union members. I went for a long while following orders and never knowing what they were for. I came to the conclusion that I was going to be kept in the dark indefinitely, so I gave up, came here to die. Perhaps in this way you and I are alike.*

Richard swallowed, wondered if it was his destiny to die out here in the desert as well—but then he thought of Alix, hoped with all his might that she was alive so that he would have a sense of purpose. If he made it into the city, he could get help, if he went back to Steel Garden, maybe *he* could help.

"I need to keep moving," he said. "When it's light again."

*Where will you go?*

"I don't know," Richard answered. "To find my girl and my child, I guess."

*Ah. I sense the family presence in you.*

"It was an accident."

*The procreative process?*

Richard decided not to go into detail concerning Alix's literary impregnation. "Well, no—I take that back. I very much want her to have my child...but I'm afraid it's going to be born to a father who has no idea what life on Earth is about."

*What is done is done. You have a wife, a child. The family presence alone is something to live for, is it not?*

"Is that how it works on your world?"

*Somewhat. Family is more a human trait. My people live many hundreds of years, time in which it is all too easy to neglect family in an effort to gain knowledge, experience—but humans only have a precious few years allotted to them. There is little time to amass wisdom, so you must trust instinct, you must trust each other. The family presence is vital because you must pass down your knowledge so that it may survive for the benefit of future generations.*

Richard let go of Ben. Leaning back on his haunches, he lifted his head to the stars, tried to reclaim the small bit of comfort he'd found earlier, and he wondered if maybe there was still hope, still a chance.

Perhaps the story wasn't yet over.

Taking Ben's hand once again, he asked, "Are you really ready to die?"

*It is not as bad as one might think. When I die, I will bring with me all the memories and experiences, all the stories ever told throughout my lifetime in the flesh, and I will share them with God, and it will be good.*

A moment of silence passed during which Richard felt Ben's pride in knowing that he would be taken care of after death. It was purely an objective feeling.

Ben seemed to sense this. *Ah, but you...you feel you have no one to tell your story to.*

Richard shook his head.

*Tell me your story, then. I will listen.*

Richard's objectivity cracked, just a bit, and he felt a comforting warmth spread through him—it was a far more pleasant feeling than the frantic heat he'd been experiencing as of late, and he knew just having someone to talk to would, if nothing else, help pass the time until he could decide what to do.

For the next few hours, he sat with Ben and let his story flow, beginning with a distant morning when Juju had roused him from bed to witness a failed escape attempt, and narrating a period of four weeks that had felt more like four months. As he spoke, the scenery shifted appropriately from scene to scene, and it was obvious Ben was quite taken aback, though he never once interrupted.

It was a standard-fare tale (if Richard's technique could at all be called "standard"), with all the details intact—until a certain specific scene came up where Richard was laying in bed and panting uncontrollably beneath the weight of an incredible burden—

—Sunday afternoon. The end of everything. The crux.

"I sat up," he said, telling the story and re-living it, both at once. "I swung my legs over the side of my cot, sat gripping the mattress edge as I stared at the wall. 'Nothing ever changes,' I rasped, grinding my teeth, feeling the skin of my story weighing down heavy on me." All comfort drained from him; he was right back where he'd been before, right back in the middle of an emotional fever pitch.

Something has to give, he thought. Something has to *start*. I can't keep holding back, pushing down—

Quietly, quickly, he said, "It began."

He took a deep breath, then let it out in a long, steady sigh that caused the walls of his reverie to ripple and fade and bleed into early morning firelight, sand, agonized metal, ailing night.

Ben lay cold and motionless in his arms. Richard hadn't noticed his passing. For what it was worth, he'd died with a smile on his face.

He sat with Ben's body a while longer as dawn presented the first tentative rays of sunlight. When it was bright enough, he left the Kiengiri beside his rock and started walking eastward.

# Chapter 29

"I'm getting déjà vu," said the guard.

Richard shielded his eyes from the sun, saw Newbie walking toward him on the other side of the fence.

"You're that guy I caught running around the other night, right?"

Richard took a handful of steps toward the gate entrance. "Yeah."

Newbie shook his head, tapped out a code on his clipboard; immediately, the gate began sliding open. "You do this sort of thing a lot, don't you?"

"I sleepwalk," Richard replied, certain that was what he was doing right now, for as he glanced around at the campus, he saw no signs of struggle or strife, no shattered glass, no broken bodies.

"Yeah, well, you should be more careful. God knows what's out there just waiting for you to be its lunch. Come on, now. Inside."

Richard stepped inside the gate. His feet were torn to shreds, his leg muscles sore, and he was absolutely parched—he knew he was going to have to spend some time in the infirmary, but something inside him tingled deliciously nonetheless.

"Now," said Newbie, closing the gate, "I'm supposed to run you in, but since you *did* do me a favor the other night, I guess I can let you off with a warning this time—*another* one. Besides, you look like you need a shower more than a lecture from Parsons."

Richard was only half paying attention as he asked, "I did you a favor?"

"Yeah, when you told me about the RFID tags. I would have found out eventually, but they still like to keep us newbies in the dark our first few weeks on the job. A *joke*, they say."

"Oh." Richard started walking toward his building. "Well, thanks. I appreciate it."

Behind him, Newbie mumbled something about "being more careful next time," and then shuffled back into his booth.

Richard went home. Well, home and not home, he noticed as he stepped into the plaza. Certain details had been omitted, others kept. For starters, everything was in pristine condition, no broken glass, no smoldering debris, the ground swept so clean that the concrete actually sparkled. People went about their business, washing, hanging, chatting pleasantly. Richard decided, as he stood under one of the sprays and scrubbed the desert gunk from his hair and skin, that this was home as he *wanted* it to be—an illusion, a dream, a story left untended. Or maybe he was dead, and this was some sort of afterlife.

Nina stepped under the spray beside him and smiled sunnily. "Enjoying your

day off?" she asked, turning on the water.

Richard nodded, not quite sure if it was true.

I hope, he thought. I hope, hope...

"There's supposed to be a special program on the news tonight," Nina said. "They say the war is over."

"That would be great," Richard said.

He finished his shower, stepped away from the spray.

"See you on the roof?" Nina asked, starting on her hair.

"Of course," replied Richard.

He left the plaza, went inside his apartment. Gramma waved to him from the breakfast table, where she was slicing potatoes, carrots, and scallions for dinner. Grampa was in his usual chair—sleeping, it looked like.

Richard took the hint and went into the bedroom for a much-needed nap. As he lay still and let his mind filter through the various possibilities of where, when, and *how* he was where he was, there came a light rapping on the doorframe.

It was Grampa, standing in the doorway with his arms folded, a smile on his face.

He said, "Alix stopped by earlier, said she was sorry for missing you on your day off and that she would stop by later during the address."

Richard sat up, rubbed his eyes. "Grampa?"

"Yes, Richard?"

"Is...is everything okay?"

"Of course. Everything's fine."

"But—I mean, I thought you were..." Richard trailed off, afraid to manifest a negative suggestion by speaking it out loud. So he said, "I...I saw you in your chair...asleep."

"Hey, it's my day off, too," Grampa said, chuckling. "I had the strangest dream, though. I dreamed we lived by the beach, and I was sitting in my recliner for years and years, just watching the waves from the window. Like watching a movie on a screen, actually. Strange."

Richard nodded. "Yeah...strange."

Grampa walked over to his bed, sat down. "How is she?"

"Who?"

"Alix."

"Oh...she's fine."

"That's good. I'm looking forward to being a great-grandfather."

Richard's cheeks flamed. "So, you know?"

"Why wouldn't I?"

"I don't know. I guess I'm just kind of out-of-it today."

Grampa nodded, left his bed and came to sit beside Richard. "We'll work it out, one day at a time. I want you to know that, Richard. We're family. We stick together. I don't want you thinking this is some sort of mistake—life is never a mistake."

Richard nodded, and Grampa left him to his nap. He slept through the rest of

the afternoon and into the early evening. At a quarter to six, Squirt appeared by his side and informed him that "it was time." Then he bounded out of the room, yelling an over-exuberant "goodbye Mrs. Doroschenko!" as he went.

Getting dressed, Richard went into the living room and asked his grandparents if they were coming up to the roof.

"We'll be up," said Gramma. She was storing leftovers in the icebox; Grampa was wiping down the table. "Oh, and when you're hungry for dinner, check the icebox, okay? You were sleeping so soundly, I didn't want to bother you."

"Thanks," said Richard, wondering if he was *still* asleep.

Outside, the air was uncommonly cool. Richard stepped along the unguarded breezeway, feeling an inexplicable calm fill him to the brim. Another of the men was showering; the Hags' whistles wafted down from the rooftop, audacious, familiar, comforting.

There were other voices too, talking, laughing—Richard could hear them all: Juju and Mrs. Foster engaged in a political debate, the Peterson girls playing Patty Cake, Chad strumming his guitar.

Richard stopped at the staircase, eager to rush up and see everyone, but afraid if he did so he would find out it was all a mirage.

A gentle hand caressed his shoulder.

Alix.

"Hey," she said.

"Hey," he said.

She pecked him on the cheek. "I came by before."

"I know."

"Have you heard the news? It's over."

"The war?"

"Yes. My parents say it's going to change everything. One chapter ending, a new one beginning."

Richard smiled. "Like a story that never ends."

"Like a story that never ends—and if it's true, then they won't need us here anymore. We'll all be going back to the city."

"That would be cool."

"Wouldn't it?" Alix watched the setting sun. "I mean, in Pacifica it's different. Everything's going to be different."

"I'll still be a father."

"And I'll be a mother. Isn't that scary?"

"Terrifying."

"Wonderful, too. Terrifying and wonderful."

"I don't know if I'm ready—if *we're* ready."

Alix took a deep breath and linked her arm with Richard's as she poised her foot above the first step. "Let's find out."

They started up the stairs together.

# About the Author

Jesse Gordon is the occasional author of numerous books, short stories, and screenplays. He is also creator and supreme overlord of the *SuperMegaNet* pseudoverse. Current projects include finishing his latest novel and finding the perfect matcha latte, though not necessarily in that order.